

The Father's Heart

By Dr. Dave Neale

Behind the Text

In the 150 or so sermons I've had the privilege to bring to our church family, you will have noticed a lot of OT (because I love its colourful stories), and mostly gospel passages in Matthew, Mark and Luke (the synoptic gospels). Less so, Paul I suppose and rarely in the Gospel of John. Even though we follow the lectionary my own personal canon impinges on my selection of texts.

I haven't done much from John because this gospel does not have its own dedicated year in the three-year lectionary cycle of A/B/C.

For the remaining time I have with you, about 10 messages, I choose to diverge from the lectionary to focus on the Gospel of John.

For the most part neither his followers, nor certainly his opponents, knew who Jesus was during his earthly ministry.

John is a singular and astonishing account of Jesus' life in which he focuses on the *meaning* of his life and who he was.

This is quite different from the synoptics where the focus is on what Jesus *said and did*, with quite a dose of mystery as to what it all meant.

The Gospel of Mark starts his gospel with Jesus' baptism. Matthew starts with his genealogy. Luke starts with his birth. But John starts with *who* he is.

John, *begins* with the assertion of *who* this man was, on a scale never even dreamt of in the synoptics.

In layperson's terms... who was this guy? That is what the gospels teach us. Who *was* He?

John has a vast mystical perspective on the identity of Jesus that has actually been far more influential in Christian theology than the simple stories of the synoptics.

John is quite different. Over the course of the next few months, I'll point to some of those differences between John and the other gospel writers.

For example, there are only seven miracles in John and they are highly symbolic in nature.ⁱ

There are in-depth conversations that have profound meaning for us: Nicodemus (3), the Samaritan Woman at the Well (4). There are memorable metaphors for the meaning of the life of Jesus. He is the bread of heaven. He is the vine. He is the good shepherd. He is the light of the world (8).

Almost all of it is unique to John, that is it does not appear in the synoptics.

What I will do now is some exegesis on one particular verse of John 1, verse 18. Then we'll look at how the Creed expands on the John tradition. Finally, we will consider together what this passage means for how we live today.

In the Text

***In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* (1:1)**

In the first verse of his gospel John transforms the gentile wandering Rabbi of Galilee and Judea into the Cosmic Christ. It is *this* identity which pervades every sentence of John's gospel.

Our text is the 18th verse of chapter one that we heard read this morning.

No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the father's heart, who has made him known.

Word of the day, "ontology": "The branch of metaphysics that studies the nature of existence and being."

So, we leap immediately deep into the transcendent realm to where the ontology of Jesus is proclaimed.

First is the phrase ***God the only Son...*** It is two words in Greek (μονογενῆς Θεος). These simple four words in English, listen to them... ***God the only Son...*** are basically an equal sign between God and Jesus.

Hard to get your head around that!

This is what makes Christian belief so distinctive among all world religions, and also so scandalous among all the belief systems in the world.

That the eternal Word, Creator of all, himself became flesh and walked among us... draws us headlong into a vast cosmic space and time. The Webb Telescope doesn't even begin to capture the panorama of this idea.

The word ***only*** means "unique" and comes from an important Greek word for John, μονογενῆς, or *monogenēs*, literally "only child".ⁱⁱ But here with an obviously heightened meaning.

We heard the phrase in vs 14 of our reading, ...***the glory as of a Father's only son...***ⁱⁱⁱ

And you will certainly know the word from one of the most famous lines from John's gospel, 3:16: ***For God loved the world in this way, he gave his only son that whosoever believes in him might have everlasting life.***

The ***second*** aspect to reflect on is this lovely phrase, ...***who is close to the father's heart***

The Message, ...***the one who exists at the very heart of the Father...***

Literally, "the one from the very chest of the father." κολπον, or *kolpon*, "bosom, breast, chest."

"...in the bosom of the Father," one writer puts it.^{iv} This is a very human and emotional way to attempt to communicate the inexpressible oneness of the Father and the Son.

The ***third*** aspect is this, that this emanation from the bosom of God, *reveals God*. That is its purpose. That is the "why" of all of this exalted language.

My translation, ***It is God the only Son, who proceeds eternally from his very heart, who makes God known to us.***

We are to think of this as God's dynamic redemptive movement toward his beloved humanity.

We recited the Nicene Creed this morning.

Listen to how the curious line of the Creed attempts to expand expressly on the topic of the ontology of Jesus. Instead of a single crisp phrase, the Creed piles up a series of words to attempt to communicate the equation of God with Jesus:

...the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father (John 1:14, 18, 3:16, the only Son of God, or only begotten Son)

God from God

Light from Light

True God from true God – all ways to attempt to convey the identity of the God Man.

Begotten, not made, of one being with the Father. (the so-called *homoousian*, “of one being”; meant to counter the views of Arius that Jesus was created by God and not fully equal with God).
He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.

All this in the Creed is an elucidation of the theology of John 1.

From the Text

First, is it even possible to believe this? How could I even say “I believe this!” It is beyond my comprehension. But my life and mind can be drawn to a sublime reflection of ***God the only Son***.

I can bear testimony to my love and affirmation of those reflections.

It creates a vast open space in my view of life that is a panorama of transcendence, filled with ***grace upon grace... full of grace and truth.*** This redemptive vision is a transforming power in my life.

It's not that we “believe it”, so much as that we “behold it.” That changes us and everything about the world.

Second, we need this more than ever. We need a sublime vision, we need hope, we need heroes in our lives.

Someone might say, “Why are you even talking about such an exalted transcendent figure as this Jesus of John? Can't you see what a mess the world is in? Are you just living in a fantasy, a wanna-be reality where holiness reigns and purity is all?”

But that is why we need this all the more.

I've been wanting to tell you a story about an experience I had as post-grad at Sheffield University; this was the late 80s. My doctoral dissertation was on sinners in the Gospel of Luke.^v

Basically, I took exception to the views on this issue by the great scholar E.P. Sanders. Now his work is as dense as it comes and the product of a prodigious intellect (he passed in 2022). He was not only an expert in the gospels but had an oceanic grasp rabbinic Judaism – a rare combination in a NT scholar.

He was the top scholar in the field of Jesus studies, so in vogue in the 80s and 90s. At the annual Society of Biblical Literature conferences in the US, which drew 6000 scholars, E.P. Sanders was often the keynote speaker at plenary sessions.

I met him briefly once.

Sanders happened to be Professor of Exegesis of Holy Scripture at Oxford University at that time. The most prestigious chair in the world in NT studies.

I happened to attend a small NT conference at Oxford with 30 or so of the leading NT scholars in England at the time.

I had sat down for a presentation in a modestly sized room and who sat down next to me but the great man himself! With whom I dared to take exception to some of his conclusions! I was so intimidated and insecure in my abilities in the field that I was struck absolutely dumb... all I could manage was a hello.

If I had turned to him and said, "Ed... (his friends called him Ed)... I think we may not have it quite right on the historical meaning of sinners in your chapter 6 of *Jesus and Judaism*."

It might have changed my research if I had been able to talk about it with him in person. I've always regretted my timidity; but the moment has stayed with me.

We are speaking about the exalted status of the Christ. We need heroes today. We need to interact with greatness. We need a vision of sublime truth in life. That is why we need the cosmic Word now, more than ever!

Because I don't believe for one minute people who are killing others over some sense of divine right to a piece of land, have the slightest clue about the nature of God. Everybody need to sit down and talk it out - not shoot it out.

It is because the world is the way it is, that we need to hold before us the supreme hope that the heart of God is in eternal procession toward all of his beloved human family. We are not loathed by God, we are beloved by God, in spite of our unloveliness.

Well, because today, more than ever before, we need to be able to imagine the nature of the divine in order to rise above the mundane. We need to have the *idea* of the transcendent to experience the Presence of Jesus.

And I should have turned to Professor Sanders and said... "You know, Ed..." I think I'm right!

Now... come to the Table of the Lord with us and celebrate the Sublime Presence together..

Amen

ⁱ Water into wine at the wedding (2); healing the official's son (4); healing the cripple man (5); feeding the 5000 (6); walking on water (6); healing the blind man (9); raising Lazarus (11).

ⁱⁱ Also used for only child in Luke 7:12 at Nain, 8:42 of Jarius' daughter, and 9:38.

ⁱⁱⁱ Some see the echo of Psalm 2:7 here, where Israel is called the Son of God. ***He said to me, “you are my son; today I have begotten you.”*** You see the intertext particularly in the LXX usage of “begotten,” the same root word as in the Greek of the John text.

^{iv} Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed*, p. 121.

^v I saw this as a literary device; I still do. The idea is that “sinners” and “Pharisees” are religious categories in the story, and it is Jesus’ treatment of the sinners which defines who he is and causes conflict with his religious contemporaries.