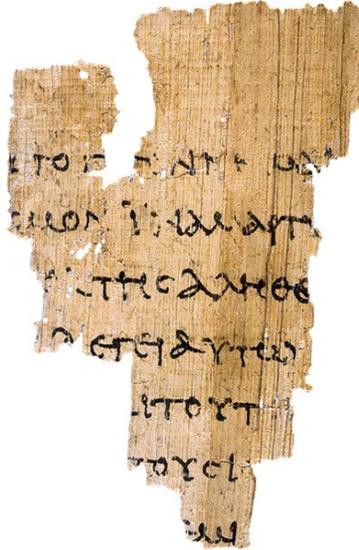


Hi All!

I'm posting this written form of my message from Jan 5 as the recording has a technical flaw and was not captured. I hope you find these remarks helpful. Please forgive the truncated style (and errors!) as it is just my preaching notes

God Bless,

Dave Neale



Years ago I stood in the John Rylands Library in Manchester with some fellow post-grads from the University of Sheffield, waiting to see the holy grail of biblical mss. Papyrus 52, or just P52. It is the earliest surviving scrap of the New Testament; a piece of papyrus about 2 ½ by 3 ½ inches. It contains writing on both sides from John chapter 18, indicating that it was as a codex, a book.

It dates from 125-150 CE, that is, a copy probably only a generation or two distant from the hallowed papyrus on which John wrote the original. In all of the mss history of ancient documents, nothing even comes close to being as near the original as this tiny scrap of John. Typically copies of ancient mss are removed from their originals by hundreds and hundreds of years.

The Dead Sea Scrolls are removed from their originals by at least 5-800 years.... and this fragment of John by only a few decades. It's an extraordinary discover. To my surprise the librarian just walked it out to us, between two pieces of plexiglass, with tape around the edges and put it on the table in front of us. I remember it like it was yesterday, but it was 32 years ago.

The Gospel of John is unique. It contains an entire tradition that is quite different in both the **content** of the stories it tells and in the **nature of the telling**, from that which we find in Matthew/Mark/Luke. Fascinating!

In the place of parables we have long discourses on bread, water, light, the good shepherd, the vine, the door and the way. In the place of myriad miracles we have 7, each told for a specific theological purpose (wedding in Cana [3], woman of Samaria[4], healing a lame man on Sabbath [5], feeding 5000 [6], walks on water [6], man born blind[9], Lazarus 11).

And above all, we have a theologian who tells us the story of Jesus life through vivid characters and topics, freely drawing theological conclusions, not-so-subtle allegory and doing so in ways that the synoptic writers never felt free to do. John presents to us not the Son of Man but the Cosmic Jesus.

In March our lectionary readings will take us to two great John stories, Nicodemus and the Woman at the Well in Samaria. I really look forward to looking at those wonderful passages with you. They are beyond remarkable.

In the Text

In the beginning....

The “magnificent prologue” ought not be too much commented on. Like a masterpiece of art, the Mona Lisa... describing it can never convey its meaning. So I’m not going to do much of that. I just think you need to reread it and let John speak to you directly. But I will say a few things by way of context, because you knew I was going to anyway....

Even though there is no quote of the Old Testament here, there is deep “intertextuality.” By which I mean this passage evokes a familiar voice from the first sentence of the author’s own Hebrew Bible (I use the terms OT and HB interchangeably. They are the same document, although the books in the HB are organized differently. I use the name Hebrew Bible when I want to emphasize we are referring to the Bible of the NT author. Not a written copy, those would have existed only in Synagogues)

The intertext is obviously the first sentence of the entire Bible, ***In the beginning...*** Genesis 1:1.

Btw, in the Hebrew Bible, the books are named by the first words of the book. So Genesis is *Bereshit*, “In the beginning.”

So when John begins his Gospel with the same words, although in Greek, *En archēn*, he consciously is saying ‘I’m retelling the creation story.’

So in Genesis:

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “let there be light,” and there was light. (Gen 1:1-3)

A “wind from God” *ruach Elohim*, the wind, the breath, the Spirit of God broods over the face of the deep, over the water of chaos.

John 1:1

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. (John 1:1-3)

In John we are told that there is something that we have not previously known about creation... that Jesus was present as the creative Word.

Here is true intertextuality!

Then there are some remarks on John the Baptist in vs 6-9. Remember how I mentioned a few weeks ago, that the Gospel of John is at pains to establish that Jesus, not John, was the Messiah, and that the Johannine communities needed to understand this. So look at the prominence John gives to this issue.

The broad stroke in this prologue is from the universes at its inception to the pinpoint in history of one man. The Word became flesh. It all comes down to Incarnation. What a majestic sweep. What a stupendous, bodacious, game-changing 18 verses.

Then we find this in the middle of this great idea....

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. (v 10)

One of the most challenging and interesting courses I ever taught was Intro to World Religions. I put it in the core curriculum at Ambrose University in the late 90s, when we were a tiny downtown university college.

I put World Religions in the core bc I can't see how we can expect to witness to Christ if we don't understand the faith of others, or the lack of faith. Stephen Covey was right: first seek to understand in order to be understood.

I wasn't qualified but I couldn't find anyone to teach it because Christians do not often make the study of comparative religion their main focus of study in academia. It was fascinating. All religion systems have the goal of achieving transcendence and identify the human problem which is the obstacle, and they propose a solution. That's what religions are.

Btw...they just got brand new chem labs at Ambrose. I'm so proud of that school. It is an amazing place today. I hired the first science prof back in the late 90s and look how far we have come. I love that you can become a sociologist or a pre-med or teacher or missionary or pastor at our denominational university.

In Buddhism the ***problem*** is attachment to the material world/ the ***solution*** is detachment.

In Islam the ***problem*** is disobedience to God/ the ***solution*** is obedience to Allah as prescribed by the Koran.

In Both Judaism and Christianity the ***problem is alienation from God***, for a variety of reasons....and here in vs 10 is our ***solution*** to the problem of alienation from God.

What is unique about the "problem," this alienation, is that it is often presented in what I would call a parent/child dynamic.

It's like that point in the rearing of offspring that they reach the stage when the parent knows nothing; that time when if the parent isn't present it is the same as if the parent does not exist. It's in full evidence by the teens. I can remember thinking that my Dad didn't really understand much of anything.

But not to worry parents, it starts to come around when the kids hit their 40s. Hang in there a few more decades and you'll be fine.

...yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. (v 10)

What was it the people never really did? Trust that God had them in his care. This was always the problem. Read Exodus (I like it because I think it is a good metaphor for the spiritual journey), read all of the prophets, read Job, read the gospels. There is just this sense of alienation... A God longing to reconcile the world to Himself and we, his wilful children, will not.

- No sooner are the people of Israel liberated from Egypt than they complain against Moses in the desert. Where is our food... we are sick of this manna... ***If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in Egypt, when we sat by our fleshpots and ate our fill of bread...***(16:2). Thanks a lot Moses for liberating us from Egypt... Isn't this just great!
- Where is our water? ***Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our livestock with thirst?***
- And then there was the Golden Calf.... And that really got them in trouble with Moses and the Lord. (Ex 32) No sooner had Moses been away up the mountain longer than they thought quite right they set about melting down their gold to make new gods. It was not a good situation.
- ***Even Jesus as he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, said, "if you, even you had only recognized on the day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes." (Lk 19:41)***

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! (Lk13:34)

Of the People of Israel God says: The more I called you the more you went from me...I took you up in my arms; but you did not know that I healed you. I led you with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to you like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to you and fed you. Hos 11:1-4

Alienation, as a child from its loving parent.

In the middle of this prologue there is a solution, in the form of an invitation.

They did not receive him, but to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. (v 13)

Now... what does this mean to "receive him"?

- The specific word here is significant I think. ***Lambanō*** and ***paralabanō***. I checked a number of translations. Most use the word "receive," but others way "welcome him," "...so did take him" ... "did want him"
- I think it has more of a flavour of the giving and receiving of the sacred tradition. And this language is synonymous with the phrase "to believe in his name."
 - ***For I received (paralambanō) from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread.... (1 Cor 11:23)***

- that is ***accept, welcome, do so take him***....unlike the children who have for countless generations rejected His loving care, unlike a world that today does not know him.... that God is personal and He cares for him or her or they, and that we ***accept, welcome, do so take him***... and awaken the heart to realize his constant motherly love for us... to make room in a broken and doubting heart for the possibility that God really does have a mother's care for us....
- ...to these he gives the power to become the children of God, not born of flesh and blood, but born of the Spirit of God. And sealed in the Spirit (Eph

But as many people there are in the world, the path into the heart of God is unique, because every person is different. So there is no formula. No magic sinner's prayer, only this. That we all must accept that God has a place in his heart and care for us... And that, fair is fair, correspondingly, we must make room for him!

But the earnest sceptic might say, "but Pastor Dave, the intellectual barriers are too much, I can't even get to theism from where I stand, much less Christian faith." "I'm a science person!" We get that here. I love science too, I think I've shown that at Ambrose. What... you think I don't have doubts and intellectual barriers? We all do... get over yourself. I've got lots of university degrees too, but I don't really know ***anything about God that has not been revealed to me by God, through grace***. There are some things where plain old smarts aren't enough.

But the question is... ***can you make room in your heart for something that you don't know?*** Can you open the door to the possibility? Because Jesus said knock and the door will be opened to you. Seek and you will find.

Because if you can do that... ***you should come and take communion with us this morning***. Whether this is the ***first step*** in this direction you have ever contemplated, or if you've been ***following God your whole life***..... we are all equal before God... and God ***will*** meet you. Maybe not all at once. Maybe there never will be an epiphany, but there will be a journey.

I like the description of the journey out of Egypt in Exodus 17:1: ***From the Wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages as the Lord commanded***.

They took those first steps, and God asks just that we come to Him and accept, welcome and do so take him to our hearts....

For those who did on that Exodus it is said... They beheld God, and the ate and drank (Ex 24).