

INTRODUCING JOHN

Who composed the text?

Like the other Gospels, the Gospel of John was written within a Christian community which had its own rich traditions and life. Many people, therefore, would have contributed to it. Members of the community who knew Jesus personally would have shared their memories with others, and not only their memories but also their understanding of the significance of Jesus for themselves and for their world. They, and those who joined the community through their ministry, would have continued to reflect on the significance of Jesus and of his actions and words. They would have done this in the light of their own personal experiences and the experiences of the community as well as insights gained from reflections upon the inspired words of their sacred Writings. Their growing insights would have found expression in the teaching that took place in the community and in the preaching and the sharing that was part of the community's liturgical life.

The Beloved Disciple

Among those responsible for the traditions which find written expression in the Gospel, one person stands out. In the Gospel itself we are not told his name. He is identified simply and significantly as 'the disciple whom Jesus loved'. John chapter twenty-one was added after his death. The author of the chapter mentions 'the disciple whom Jesus loved' as being among those who were fishing on the lake of Galilee. It was he who recognised the risen Jesus (21:7). Later in the chapter he identifies him as 'the one who had reclined next to Jesus at the supper' (21:20). He identifies him as the author of the Gospel: 'This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true' (21:24). We cannot be sure that the Beloved Disciple wrote everything in the first twenty chapters, but he is identified as being the key witness whose testimony guarantees the authenticity of what we find written there.

The first time he is mentioned is at the last supper where, as just noted, he is reclining at table beside Jesus (13:23). He is mentioned again as being with Jesus' mother by the cross (19:25). Jesus commends his mother to his care. Then after being told of the mysterious blood and water which flowed from the pierced side of Jesus, we read: 'He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth' (19:35). The source of this trustworthy information is, once again, the Beloved Disciple. We hear of him again when he runs with Peter to the empty tomb on the morning of the Resurrection (20:2). Throughout this scene he is referred to as 'the other disciple' (20:2,3,4,8). This has led a number of scholars to suggest that he may be the unnamed 'other disciple' who is with Peter in the courtyard of the high priest after Jesus' arrest (18:15-16). Is he, perhaps, also the unnamed disciple of John the Baptist who, together with Andrew, is the first to meet Jesus (1:35-40)? There is no way of knowing.

Early tradition is unanimous in giving John as the name of the Beloved Disciple. Irenaeus, writing towards the end of the second century, identifies the author of the Fourth Gospel as 'John, the disciple of the Lord, who had leant back on his breast' (*Against the Heresies* 3.1.2, quoted by Eusebius, *History of the Church* 5.8).

Likewise Origen in his commentary on the Gospel (c.240AD) writes: ‘It is likely that the one reclining on Jesus’ breast, one of the disciples whom Jesus loved, was John, who wrote the Gospel’ (32.260). Augustine in his First Tractate on John preached c.410AD says: ‘John reclined upon the breast of the Lord and drank that which he might give to us to drink’ (1.7.2). Respecting this tradition, we have entitled this book *The Gospel of Saint John: an introductory commentary* and we will be referring to the author throughout as John.

John was a common name at the time. Is the Beloved Disciple the John who was one of the Twelve? From the other Gospels it appears that this John did hold a special place among the Twelve. Jesus chose him along with his brother James and Peter to witness the raising to life of Jairus’s daughter (Mark 5:37), and his own transfiguration (Mark 9:2) and agony (Mark 14:33). It would seem fitting that he would be described as ‘the disciple whom Jesus loved’. In the Acts we find John linked with Peter in Jerusalem (Acts 3-4) and also in Samaria (Acts 8:14). This fits with the presentation in the Gospel where the Beloved Disciple appears with Peter every time he is mentioned except at the cross where Peter is absent.

However, Eusebius quotes Papias as mentioning that there were two Johns, both buried in Ephesus, one the apostle (whom Eusebius assumes is the writer of the Gospel) and the other a presbyter (*History of the Church*, 3.39). Polycrates, bishop of Ephesus, writing c.190AD, identifies the Beloved Disciple as John the Presbyter (Eusebius, *History* 5.24). The attributing of the Gospel to John the Apostle may have arisen because of a confusion between these two Johns.

Since the Beloved Disciple is not named in the Gospel it is perhaps better that we not attempt to name him either. After all, it is not his name which is important, it is his faith, the special place he has in the affection of Jesus, the way he responds to Jesus’ love and the place he holds in the community as a witness to Jesus and as a model of Christian discipleship. If we want to know him better, we will have to read carefully the passages in which he appears, but also, since he is called the Beloved Disciple and is offered as a model, we should watch the various characters of the Gospel who welcome Jesus’ love and who come to believe in him with what the Gospel considers a mature faith.

The community of the Beloved Disciple

There are a number of layers of material in the text as we now have it. Besides the Beloved Disciple whose witness is drawn on, whose preaching may well have influenced some of the discourses spoken by Jesus and who may have himself written some of the text (21:24), there is the anonymous writer, a member of the community of the Beloved Disciple, who composed the bulk of the text and was responsible for its basic thrust and organisation. A third person composed the final chapter. There are also indications that other sections of the Gospel were added and not by the author of the final chapter. So it seems that a number of people from the community of the Beloved Disciple had a hand in producing different sections of the text. All this must be kept in mind when we speak of the author simply as ‘John’.

A poet-historian with an eye for drama

It will become clear from a reading of the Gospel that the Beloved Disciple himself or the member of his community who composed the bulk of the text is an inspired preacher as well as a poet with a keen eye for dramatic effect. We should not be surprised that the author would write in such a fashion. People were familiar with the ancient myths which, through the medium of story, expressed insights into the fundamental questions that human beings pose concerning the human condition. They were also familiar with the great Greek tragedies which dramatised these myths. John's insight came from Jesus, whose life had its own special tragic quality. He is God's Son sharing our human condition and commissioned by his Father to reveal the true nature of God 'so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life'(3:16). 'I came', he declares, 'that they may have life and have it abundantly'(10:10). In spite of the wonder and power of his love, we are surprised at the opposition he encounters: 'his own people did not accept him'(1:11). Such a story lends itself to the dramatic medium of tragedy.

According to the standard canons of tragedy, one would expect some terrible fate to befall those who, in their blindness, reject the very one who has come to save them (see, for example, *The Bacchae* by Euripides). It is here that the Gospel, because of what actually happened, takes a surprising turn. It is Jesus who suffers a terrible fate. The one who is to bring about the reign of God's love is killed. The innocent one has his life cruelly taken from him. The one who alone is in perfect communion with God, the source of life, is crucified. Yet – and here is the astounding thing about the life of Jesus – it is in and through this apparent and tragic failure that Jesus accomplishes the task for which he was sent. His last words from the cross are: 'It is accomplished'(19:30). His dying is his hour of glory (12:23; 17:1). Through Jesus' passion Thomas comes to see who Jesus is and to acknowledge him as 'my Lord and my God'(20:28). John uses the poetic and dramatic form of Greek drama because he wants to convince his audience of the profound religious significance of Jesus in language with which they are familiar.

It is important, however, from the outset, to stress that while the author is a poet in that he creates speeches and perhaps also situations in order to bring out the significance of Jesus, he is also an historian. He is not composing fiction to impress. He is expressing what he has learned about Jesus in a symbolic and dramatic way for he wants to bring out the significance of the real Jesus in a way that is truthful to the mystery of Jesus' person and to the wonder of what Jesus revealed. He is also concerned to remain faithful to the tradition which he and his community have received. Of course, as with every historian, he is giving his interpretation of the facts and so the glass through which we are looking at Jesus is necessarily coloured. However, as noted in the previous chapter, the acceptance of this Gospel by the wider Christian community gives us confidence that through this beautifully coloured window we are looking at the real Jesus. The author is a historian who gives creative expression to his faith-insights into the real Jesus. Facts are important to him for it is his belief that God is revealed in the real Jesus of history. He uses a poetic and dramatic medium because he judges that it is the best way to communicate the truth about Jesus which he has come to know especially through the witness of the Beloved Disciple.

Jesus' words

The other writings which issue from the same community (the Letters of John) show that its members were quite capable of expressing their insights into Jesus in forms other than a gospel. By composing a gospel the author is not just giving us insights into the real Jesus, he is presenting Jesus himself as speaking and acting. When Jesus speaks the author is giving us words not as from himself but as from Jesus. We must note, however, that we are listening to Jesus' words not only as they were remembered by those who heard him speak in the period of his public ministry, but also as he continued to speak to his disciples through his Spirit after his glorification. We are listening to Jesus as he was heard when he walked the earth, but also as he was being heard in the experiences of the community of the Beloved Disciple. The author presents Jesus' words in a poetic rather than a prose form to highlight the fact that Jesus is 'from above'. A heightened form of language expresses more appropriately the mystery of Jesus and his revelation of God.

Though the words spoken by Jesus in this Gospel are shaped by the author, by placing them on Jesus' lips he is presenting them as true expressions of him who is the incarnation of God's Word. Furthermore, since the author would not have thought of himself as improving on the mysterious yet powerfully revealing and memorable words actually spoken by Jesus of Nazareth, we would expect him to base his reflections on actual words of Jesus which were remembered and handed down in the traditions of the community, especially by the Beloved Disciple. One indication that he is giving us such sayings may be found in the sentences spoken by Jesus which begin with the expression 'Very truly ['Amen, Amen'] I say to you'. We find this expression on the lips of Jesus twenty-five times in the Gospel. Jesus uses virtually the same expression (with only a single 'Amen') thirty one times in Matthew, thirteen times in Mark and six times in Luke. The sentences beginning in this way have a special solemnity, spoken as they are with the authority of one who is sure of his mission from God. This has led to the suggestion that we may have here actual sayings of Jesus expressed in a style that was characteristic of him.

The divinity of Jesus and his human psyche

This raises an important question. If all the words spoken by Jesus in John's Gospel were word for word recordings of his actual spoken words we would be in a position to draw conclusions from them concerning Jesus' human psyche. However, once we recognise the poetic and dramatic nature of the literary form employed by the author we must conclude that while we have an accurate portrayal of how the community of the Beloved Disciple came to understand Jesus, we do not have sufficient data from which to draw an accurate picture of Jesus' own human thoughts and feelings.

The Beloved Disciple came to know Jesus through Jesus' actual words and through what Jesus really did. Through the intimacy of his love-communion with Jesus, he was enabled to see revealed in Jesus' humanity the mystery of Jesus' identity with the divine Word. He came to realise that Jesus was the divine Son of God. He portrays Jesus to highlight this.

Introducing John

It is Jesus' claim to divinity which, more than anything else, accounted for the rejection of Jesus and of his followers by official Judaism, and since the Gospel was written to sustain the Christian community in its faith, it is Jesus' divine identity that the Gospel writer is highlighting from the beginning. As we listen to Jesus speak, we must remember that John is taking us not only and not always to the actual words spoken by Jesus, but into the heart of Jesus. He is leading us especially to the mystery of Jesus' communion with the God whom he called 'Father'. John is revealing not only what the Beloved Disciple remembered Jesus saying, but also and especially what he and others in the community came to know about Jesus through the years of their living with Jesus and through years of reflection after Jesus' death and resurrection.

Jesus spoke of God as Father. He spoke of receiving everything from his Father. The Beloved Disciple knew that God is one. Through what he learned from Jesus he came to envisage this one God as being a communion of love in which love is given (the Father) and love is received and returned (the Son). As Saint Thomas Aquinas expresses it in his commentary on John: 'The Father and the Son are distinguished by this: the Father gives and the Son receives' (n.782). Through the intimacy of love which he experienced with Jesus, the Beloved Disciple came to penetrate the mystery of Jesus' person and to see Jesus as the human expression (the incarnation) of this divine receiving and responding.

Jerome explains that John is represented by the eagle because 'he soars above the heavens and penetrates even to the Father' (*Against Jovinian* 1). Ambrose writes of John: 'No one has seen the majesty of God or been able to give expression to what he has seen with such sublime wisdom. He soars above the clouds, above the powers of heaven, beyond the angels and discovers the Word at its source: he sees the Word in God' (*Preface to Luke*).

John himself tells us that 'no one has seen God' (1:18). He knows he cannot express the being of God, for God is necessarily hidden in a mystery that is beyond human perception. But John has seen Jesus and he has been invited into the mystery of Jesus' heart and so into the communion with God that is at the very core of Jesus' being. Without pretending to be able to express the mystery of God's transcendent being, John knew that God must be as God is revealed in the love-communion which Jesus experienced and which he invited John to share. It is to highlight this that John presents Jesus the way he does.

When John focuses on the personal intimacy with God which Jesus experiences he speaks of him as Son. When he locates the mission of Jesus within the context of God's creation and the history of God's saving action in the world, he speaks of him as the Word. Before a word is uttered it is conceived in the secret of the mind and heart. God is one who gives love. God is one who receives love and returns it. God is communion. When John speaks of God as receiving and returning love he speaks in terms of the divine Word conceived in the secret of God's heart. When God wishes to express this Word he creates. That is why creation is an expression of God's glory. It is also why creation experiences a pull drawing it towards God, a kind of gravity of grace. Everything that God has made is drawn in its own way into the divine communion of love that binds God and his Word, the communion with the Father which is revealed by Jesus, his Son.

God expresses his Word in creation and through the prophets of every culture. He does so in order to convey to his creatures his love and draw them to himself. Since God is love all God's words are words expressing love and inviting to communion. John presents Jesus as the expression in human form (the incarnation) of God's Word. He knows how real is Jesus' humanity, his 'flesh' as he calls it in his Prologue (1:14), but it is the divine communion which Jesus has with the Father that he wants to highlight. He wants to take us with him as he penetrates to the very core of Jesus' humanity – the mystery of Jesus' relationship with God, a relationship which John found expressed in everything Jesus said and did and in everything Jesus continued to say and do in the community after his death and glorification. He does not want us to forget Jesus' obvious humanity, but he wants to take us with him to the mystery of the love that binds Jesus to the God he calls 'My Father'.

Isaiah had a vision of God in glory. The angels were caught up in adoration and Isaiah saw the whole of the world lit up by the divine glory (Isaiah 6:3). John came to see all Jesus' words and action in the light of the love-communion which Jesus had with his Father and it is this glory that lights up everything which John portrays in the Gospel. When he presents Jesus for our contemplation, therefore, he does not attempt to present Jesus in a psychologically convincing way. When he portrays Jesus' death we do not see it in its terrible human reality. When we listen to Jesus speak we are listening to the divine eternal Word. When we look at Jesus on the cross we, with the Beloved Disciple, behold God reigning there in love.

To portray Jesus in this way is not without its dangers. For many centuries (and still today) the Christian community had to defend its faith against those who, in their effort to explain Jesus, kept simplifying the mystery of his person by opting either for his humanity or his divinity. John's perspective on Jesus and his way of portraying him made the Gospel a favourite among those who denied the reality, or if not the reality the significance, of Jesus' humanity. Furthermore, since the Christian community and the Jewish community were not in conflict over matters of practical moral behaviour John's Gospel, in keeping with his focus on the communion of love between Jesus and the Father, speaks only of our participating in this communion and of sharing it with each other. This has a determining influence on Christian morality, but the lack of attention in the Gospel to practical moral behaviour was another reason for its popularity among those of a gnostic tendency who ignored the human reality of Jesus and tried to whisk him away into the ethereal realms where he could be comfortably fitted into a religious world view that made little moral demands on its adherents. To do this with John's Gospel they had to ignore his insistence on the incarnation, but they were still able to find plenty of texts that they could use to support their escape. The Christian community has had to resist this gnostic tendency throughout its history. We find it in certain contemporary religious movements.

Similarly with the ideas of Apollinarius of Laodicea who claimed that God took the place of Jesus' soul, so that all Jesus' psychic life was divine. For Apollinarius and those who thought like him, Jesus was God dwelling in a human body. They used John's Gospel to support their ideas. Though the Church rejected his teaching (see the Council of Constantinople, 381AD) it is not uncommon to find people who imagine Jesus much as did Apollinarius. The portrayal of Jesus, especially by John, continues to be misunderstood.

Introducing John

We have the faith of the Christian community to protect us from thinking that Jesus did not have a human psyche or from imagining his humanity as being so submerged in his divinity that he lacked a real human consciousness. One safeguard here is to keep the other Gospels with us as we read John. The earliest papyrus manuscript which gives us a substantial amount of the Gospel (P⁷⁵, c.200AD) includes also most of Luke's Gospel. The Christian community has treasured John and offers it to us for our contemplation along with the other Gospels. We need the Synoptic Gospels lest the human Jesus be lost in the sublimity of the divine, but we need John to keep reminding us that it is God to whom we are listening when we listen to Jesus and it is God whom we are watching when we look at him.

It is in John's Gospel that we find the assurance given by Jesus that he will send to the community 'the Spirit of truth who will guide you into all the truth'(John 16:13). Trusting in Jesus' word, a disciple of Jesus does not come to John's Gospel alone. As already noted, the Gospel of John, because of its emphasis, was used by people who distorted the Christian message in various ways and who broke from communion with the universal ('catholic') church because of their understanding and their behaviour. We are protected from making the same mistake also by the way in which the Gospel has been understood in the various praying communities down through the centuries especially in the liturgy, by the writings of church theologians, by the understanding shared by the leaders of the various communities meeting in council, and especially by the consistent understanding of the saints whose lives are a convincing witness of a close following of Jesus.

In these days of scientifically controlled study of the text there are many scholars who have helped us gain insights into the meaning of the Gospel¹. They do not agree on every detail but to stay in touch with their general thrust and with the truths which they hold in common is a good way to express our faith in Jesus' promise to be with the community of his disciples 'to the end of the age'(Matthew 28:20), guiding us by his Spirit. In such company we are protected from a too narrow view of the text and from repeating interpretations that have already been corrected.

¹If we focus on the third to the thirteenth century we have a number of commentaries specifically aimed at communicating a rich and orthodox understanding of John. In the Eastern Church we have sections of Origen's commentary written partly in Alexandria and partly in Caesarea (Palestine) between 230 and 242AD and available in English in volumes 80 and 89 of the series *The Fathers of the Church* (Catholic University of America, Washington DC). We also have eighty-eight homilies preached in Antioch (Syria) about 390AD by Saint John Chrysostom (also available in volumes 33 and 41 of the same series). We have the commentary by Theophylactus, written about 1100AD and available in Greek and Latin in the Migne edition of the *Fathers* (PG volume 123, columns 1127-1356 and volume 124, columns 9-318).

From the Western Fathers we have a hundred and twenty-four sermons preached by Saint Augustine in Hippo (Africa) between 406 and 420AD. This is available in English in volumes 78,79,88,90,92 of the *Fathers of the Church* series. We also have homilies on John's Gospel preached about 600AD by Pope Saint Gregory the Great (Migne, PL 76, 1075-1312), a commentary by the Venerable Bede of England written early in the eighth century (Migne, PL 92, 634-938), a commentary a little later in the eighth century by Alcuin, the teacher of Charlemagne (Migne, PL 100, 733-1008) and about 870AD from the Irishman, John Scotus Eriugena, a homily on John's Prologue (Migne, PL 122, 283-296) and some parts of his commentary on John (Migne, PL 122, 297-348). Finally, there is the commentary by Saint Thomas Aquinas which draws on the whole tradition and was written between 1269 and 1272AD. The first part of this commentary covering John chapters one to seven is available in an English translation by F. Larcher (NY Albany Magi Books Inc 1980).

Of more importance than all other commentaries, ancient or modern, is a work which can rightly be understood as the earliest commentary on John's Gospel. This is the First Letter of John. Its special importance comes from its being part of the New Testament, accepted by all Christians as inspired by the Holy Spirit and as normative of faith. It was also written, it seems, precisely to give an authoritative interpretation of the Gospel and in this way to protect members of the community of the Beloved Disciple from those who were once part of the community but who broke away and who were using John's Gospel to support their position.

For reasons already noted, John's Gospel was the favourite Gospel of early heretical sects and later among the gnostics. Its acceptance into the canon of Scripture is probably due largely to the interpretation given to it by this Letter. For this reason we will be guided, throughout this commentary, by the interpretation of John's Gospel given in the Letter. In this way we hope to avoid repeating the errors of the early heresies and to stay in touch with the 'Spirit of truth' who inspired both the Gospel and the First Letter. It is this Spirit who remains in the community of Jesus' disciples to guide us to the fullness of truth.

The Gospel and the Letter make it very clear to us that it is God's love that burns in the human heart of Jesus of Nazareth. We see it especially in the love-giving, life-giving, self-giving of Jesus from the cross. John wants us to watch the real Jesus dying and to see him pierced by a real spear. But if that is all we see we will fail to see what is really happening. What the Beloved Disciple saw and what he wants us to see is divine love pouring from the pierced side, and with Jesus' final breath he wants us to see the Spirit of God's love being poured out over us and over the whole world. What is being revealed on the cross is God's will to share with anyone who so desires the divine intimacy of God's being in whose image we are all created. It was Jesus' burning desire to share with us this love for which we were created and to invite us to share it with him.

We are witnessing a religious drama. John is asking us to penetrate with him beyond the human limitations which Jesus, as man, necessarily experienced. He wants us, from the beginning, to know that we are watching 'God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart'(1:18), so that 'through believing [we] may have life'(20:31). John wants us to know that it truly is the Word of God to whom we are listening. He does not want us to forget that in Jesus the Word is truly human, but he makes no attempt at any realistic presentation of Jesus' human psyche, or at the kind of psychological penetration that we find in the great Greek tragedies and that so interests the modern mind.

This lack of interest in realistic psychological character portrayal goes also for the secondary characters, such as the Baptist, Andrew, Peter, Thomas, the Samaritan woman, the blind man and the others who appear on the stage with Jesus. From the psychological point of view they are no more realistically portrayed than is Jesus. Different characters symbolise different groups with their different attitudes to Jesus, their different temptations to not believe, and the different ways Jesus challenges them to faith. Never do they distract us from John's central focus which remains on Jesus throughout. They are presented in such a way as to exemplify various responses to Jesus with a view to assisting the reader to identify with or reject their attitudes, so as to choose to believe rather than to disbelieve.

Place and date

There is no convincing argument against the ancient tradition that names Ephesus as the place of origin of the Gospel (see Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1). Our earliest extant manuscript of the complete text is from the fourth century. However we have a papyrus manuscript from about 200AD of the complete text up to John 15:8, minus a few verses (P⁷⁵) and also a scrap of papyrus which shows that the gospel was in circulation in central Egypt by the middle of the second century (P⁵²). The fact that the author calls those who oppose Jesus simply ‘the Jews’, and that he is appealing to Jewish members of the Christian community who seem to be vacillating in their faith because of having to choose between Christianity and the Jewish synagogue, points to a time when the communion between Christian Jews and the Synagogue was broken. This would suggest 90AD as a likely date for the composition of the bulk of the Gospel and 100AD for the final editing. The First Letter of John was probably composed sometime between these two dates.

Jesus and Jewish Wisdom literature

Each of the writings of the New Testament in its own way portrays Jesus as the fulfilment of the spirituality and the longings of the Jewish religion. John is especially influenced by the Jewish Wisdom literature which itself was influenced by Greek culture. Familiarisation with some of its main themes will help us access the kind of thinking out of which John’s portrait of Jesus emerges. Wisdom is portrayed as existing with God before creation:

The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth.

– Proverbs 8:22-23 (see also Sirach 24:9; Wisdom 6:22)

Personified Wisdom is expressed in the creating and saving word which comes from the mouth of God (see Sirach 24:3) to achieve God’s wise purpose. In the words of the prophet Isaiah:

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, 11 so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

– Isaiah 55:10-11

In language which echoes that of the Wisdom literature, John summons us to contemplate the Word: ‘In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God’(1:1-2).

Divine Wisdom is described as ‘a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty ... a reflection of eternal light’(Wisdom 7:25-26). Wisdom is said to have ‘appeared on earth and lived with humankind’(Baruch 3:37). Wisdom was instructed by God to pitch her tent in Israel (Sirach 24:8). It is Wisdom’s role to ‘utter truth’(Wisdom 9:17) and so to enlighten us as to how we should ‘learn what is pleasing to God’(Wisdom 9:10). In this way Wisdom is to lead us to life (Proverbs 4:13), salvation (Wisdom 9:18) and immortality (Wisdom 6:18-19).

And now, my children, listen to me: happy are those who keep my ways. Hear instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it. Happy is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors. For whoever finds me finds life and obtains favour from the Lord; but those who miss me injure themselves; all who hate me love death.

– Proverbs 8:32-36; see also Baruch 4:1

As Jesus approaches his tragic death, John has him pray: ‘Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory which I had in your presence before the world existed’ (17:5). Jesus is portrayed as having descended to earth from heaven (3:1), as having ‘pitched his tent among us’ (1:14). He is the light of the world (8:12) who reveals the divine glory, the radiant beauty of God (1:14). He is ‘the saviour of the world’ (John 4:32) who offers ‘eternal life’.

The long monologues which John places on Jesus’ lips remind us of similar speeches of Wisdom (Proverbs 8:3-36; Sirach 24). Bread, water and wine are found frequently in Wisdom literature as symbols for the nourishment offered by Wisdom. We are invited to eat and drink: ‘Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed’ (Proverbs 9:5). ‘Those who eat of me will hunger for more, and those who drink of me will thirst for more’ (Sirach 24:21).

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant.

– Isaiah 55:1-3

We will find similar images on the lips of Jesus. Wisdom goes out seeking disciples and challenging those who reject her (Proverbs 1:20 - 2:5). So does Jesus. Wisdom instructs her ‘children’ (Proverbs 8:32). Jesus does the same. Wisdom disciplines her disciples (Sirach 6:18) and forms them till they learn to love her (Sirach 4:12) and so become friends of God (Wisdom 7:14). We will see Jesus doing the same: pruning (cleansing) them by his word (15:3), sanctifying them in the truth (17:17), and calling them friends (15:15).

A text for prayer

At the Last Supper the Beloved Disciple heard Jesus say: ‘I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father’ (John 15:15). In his turn the Beloved Disciple shares with us what he learned from Jesus so that through believing in Jesus we too may find life (20:31). This is not the kind of learning that we can acquire ‘from the outside’ as it were.

Introducing John

Our earliest systematic commentary on John's Gospel comes from Origen, writing in Alexandria c.230AD. He states:

We might dare to say that the Gospels are the first fruits of all Scriptures, but that the first fruits of the Gospels is that according to John, whose meaning no one can understand who has not lain on Jesus' breast nor received Mary from Jesus to be his mother also. However, he who would be another John must become like John ... For indeed everyone who has been perfected 'no longer lives, but Christ lives in him'(Galatians 2:20), and since Christ lives in him it is said of him to Mary 'Behold your son'.

– Commentary on John, 1.23

He goes on to say that to be able to have an accurate understanding of this Gospel we will need 'the mind of Christ, that we may know the graces that have been given us by God'(1.24).

Let us follow the advice, too, of Augustine who reminds us that as we attend to the words of John we keep our hearts tuned to the Lord. John is giving us the words. Our understanding must come from the same source from which John himself drew (Tractate on John 1.7.2).

John has given us this sublime portrait of the one he loved. He is sharing with us the fruit of a profound intimacy and years of contemplation. His language, therefore, is symbolic in that he came to see in Jesus' actions and words a revelation of God and he wants to draw us with him into communion with this mystery.

Before commencing his commentary, Thomas Aquinas quotes the following from Paul: 'No one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God'(1Corinthians 2:11). Let us begin by praying that the same Spirit who inspired John in his writing will inspire us in our reading. This is the advice given us by the first great commentator on John, Origen of Alexandria:

Let us ask God to work with us through Christ in the Holy Spirit to explain the mystical meaning stored up like a treasure in the words.

– Commentary on John, 1.89

The structure of John's gospel

PROLOGUE: 1:1-18

PART ONE:

JESUS' PUBLIC MINISTRY (1:19 – 12:50)

ACT I : THE NEW COVENANT (1:19 – 2:12)

- Scene 1. The testimony of the Baptist (1:19-28)
- Scene 2. Further testimony of the Baptist (1:29-34)
- Scene 3. The Baptist introduces his disciples to Jesus (1:35-42)
- Scene 4. Two more disciples join Jesus (1:43-51)
- Scene 5. The marriage feast at Cana (2:1-12)

ACT II : SHARING IN THE NEW COVENANT (2:13 – 4:54)

- Scene 1. Jesus and the temple of God (2:13-25)
- Scene 2. Jesus and Nicodemus (3:1-21)
- Scene 3. Jesus and the Baptist (3:22-36)
- Scene 4. Jesus and the Samaritans (4:1-42)
- Scene 5. Jesus' word gives life (4:43-54)

ACT III : THE SON OF GOD GIVES HIMSELF FOR THE LIFE OF THE WORLD

(5:1 – 6:71)

- Scene 1. Jesus gives life to a 'dead' man (5:1-15)
- Scene 2. Jesus the Son of God (5:16-47)
- Scene 3. The Messianic banquet (6:1-15)
- Scene 4. Jesus is mysteriously present to his disciples (6:16-21)
- Scene 5. Jesus and the Passover (6:22-71)

ACT IV : JESUS, THE LIFE-GIVING LIGHT OF THE WORLD (7:1 – 8:59)

- Scene 1. Jesus goes to the festival of Booths (7:1-13)
- Scene 2. During the festival (7:14-24)
- Scene 3. Later during the festival (7:25-36)
- Scene 4. The last day of the festival (7:37-52)
- Insert: The woman who committed adultery (7:53 – 8:11)
- Scene 5. At the temple treasury (8:12-59)

ACT V : THE SHEPHERD-MESSIAH (9:1 – 10:42)

- Scene 1. Jesus gives sight to a blind man (9:1-7)
- Scene 2. The interrogation (9:8-34)
- Scene 3. The good shepherd (9:35 – 10:21)
- Scene 4. During the festival of Dedication (10:22-42)

ACT VI : THE FINAL PASSOVER DRAWS NEAR (11:1 – 12:50)

- Scene 1. Jesus hears of the illness of Lazarus (11:1-16)
- Scene 2. Jesus restores Lazarus to life (11:17-44)
- Scene 3. The Jewish Council plans to kill Jesus (11:45-54)
- Scene 4. The pilgrims discuss Jesus (11:55-57)
- Scene 5. Mary anoints Jesus (12:1-11)
- Scene 6. Jesus is welcomed into Jerusalem (12:12-19)
- Scene 7. Jesus draws everyone to himself (12:20-36)
- Scene 8. Conclusion to Jesus' public ministry (12:37-50)

PART TWO:

JESUS' RETURN TO THE FATHER (13:1 – 20:31)

ACT I : THE LAST SUPPER (13:1 – 17:26)

- Scene 1. Jesus washes the feet of his disciples (13:1-20)
- Scene 2. Jesus, Judas and the Beloved Disciple (13:21-32)
- Scene 3. Jesus' farewell speech (13:33 – 14:31)

Additions to the Supper Discourse

- 1. The vine and the branches (15:1-17)
- 2. Discipleship and persecution (15:18 – 16:4a)
- 3. Reviewing Jesus' farewell speech (16:4b - 33)
- 4. Jesus' prayer (17:1-26)

ACT II : JESUS' TRIAL AND DEATH (18:1 – 19:42)

- Scene 1. Jesus allows himself to be arrested (18:1-12)
- Scene 2. In the house of the high priest (18:13-27)
- Scene 3. Jesus is handed over to the Romans to be crucified (18:28 – 19:16a)
- Scene 4. Calvary (19:16b-42)

ACT III : JESUS IS ALIVE (20:1-29)

- Scene 1. The empty tomb (20:1-10)
- Scene 2. The risen Jesus reveals himself to Mary Magdalene (20:11-18)
- Scene 3. The risen Jesus reveals himself to the assembled disciples (20:19-23)
- Scene 4. The risen Jesus reveals himself to Thomas (20:24-29)

JOHN'S PURPOSE IN WRITING (20:30-31)

EPILOGUE (21:1-25)

John in the lectionary

1:1-18	Christmas Day and 2nd Sunday of Christmas
1:1-18	31st December
1:6-8,9-28	3rd Sunday of Advent, Year B
1:19-28	2nd January
1:29-34	2nd Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year A
1:29-34	3rd January
1:35-42	2nd Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
1:35-42	4th January
1:43-51	5th January
2:1-12	2nd Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year C
2:1-12	7th January
2:13-25	3rd Sunday of Lent, Year B
3:1-8	Monday of Week 2 of Easter
3:7-15	Tuesday of Week 2 of Easter
3:13-17	Triumph of the Cross, September 14th
3:14-21	4th Sunday of Lent, Year B
3:16-18	Trinity Sunday, Year A
3:16-21	Wednesday of Week 2 of Easter
3:22-30	12th January
3:31-36	Thursday of Week 2 of Easter
4:1-4	not in lectionary
4:5-42	3rd Sunday of Lent, Year A
4:43-54	Monday of Week 4 of Lent
5:1-3,5-16	Tuesday of Week 4 of Lent
5:17-30	Wednesday of Week 4 of Lent
5:31-47	Thursday of Week 4 of Lent
5:33-36	Friday of Week 3 of Advent
6:1-15	17th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B
6:1-15	Friday of Week 2 of Easter
6:16-21	Saturday of Week 2 of Easter
6:22-29	Monday of Week 3 of Easter
6:24-35	18th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
6:30-35	Tuesday of Week 3 of Easter
6:35-40	Wednesday of Week 3 of Easter
6:41-51	19th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
6:44-51	Thursday of Week 3 of Easter
6:51-58	Corpus Christi, Year A
6:51-58	20th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
6:52-59	Friday of Week 3 of Easter
6:60-69	21st Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
6:60-69	Saturday of Week 3 of Easter
6:70-71	not in lectionary

Introducing John

7:1-2,10,25-30	Friday of Week 4 of Lent
7:3-9,11-24	not in lectionary
7:31-36	not in lectionary
7:37-39	Vigil of Pentecost
7:40-53	Saturday of Week 4 of Lent
8:1-11	5th Sunday of Lent, Year C
8:1-11	Monday of Week 5 of Lent, Year A and B
8:12-20	Monday of Week 5 of Lent, Year C
8:21-30	Tuesday of Week 5 of Lent
8:31-42	Wednesday of Week 5 of Lent
8:43-50	not in lectionary
8:51-59	Thursday of Week 5 of Lent
9:1-41	4th Sunday of Lent, Year A
10:1-10	4th Sunday of Easter, Year A
10:1-10	Monday of Week 4 of Easter, Year B and C
10:11-18	4th Sunday of Easter, Year B
10:11-18	Monday of Week 4 of Easter, Year A
10:19-21	not in lectionary
10:22-30	Tuesday of Week 4 of Easter
10:27-30	4th Sunday of Easter, Year C
10:31-42	Friday of Week 5 of Lent
11:1-45	5th Sunday of Lent, Year A
11:45-56	Saturday of Week 5 of Lent
11:57	not in lectionary
12:1-11	Monday of Holy Week
12:12-16	Passion [Palm] Sunday
12:17-19	not in lectionary
12:20-30	5th Sunday of Lent, Year B
12:31-43	not in lectionary
12:44-50	Wednesday of Week 4 of Easter
13:1-15	Holy Thursday
13:16-20	Thursday of Week 4 of Easter
13:21-33,36-38	Tuesday of Holy Week
13:31-33a,34-35	5th Sunday of Easter, Year C
14:1-12	5th Sunday of Easter, Year A
14:1-6	Friday of Week 4 of Easter
14:7-14	Saturday of Week 4 of Easter
14:15-21	6th Week of Easter, Year A
14:15-16,23-26	Pentecost Sunday, Year C
14:21-26	Monday of Week 5 of Easter
14:23-29	6th Sunday of Easter, Year C
14:27-31	Tuesday of Week 5 of Easter
15:1-8	5th Sunday of Easter, Year B
15:1-8	Wednesday of Week 5 of Easter

15:9-17	6th Sunday of Easter, Year B
15:9-11	Thursday of Week 5 of Easter
15:12-17	Friday of Week 5 of Easter
15:18-21	Saturday of Week 5 of Easter
15:22-25	not in lectionary
15:26-27; 16:12-15	Pentecost Sunday, Year B
15:26 – 16:4	Monday of Week 6 of Easter
16:5-11	Tuesday of Week 6 of Easter
16:12-15	Trinity Sunday, Year C
16:12-15	Wednesday of Week 6 of Easter
16:16-20	Thursday of Week 6 of Easter
16:20-23	Friday of Week 6 of Easter
16:23-28	Saturday of Week 6 of Easter
16:29-33	Monday of Week 7 of Easter
17:1-11	7th Sunday of Easter, Year A
17:1-11	Tuesday of Week 7 of Eater
17:11-19	7th Sunday of Easter, Year B
17:11-19	Wednesday of Week 7 of Easter
17:20-26	7th Sunday of Easter, Year C
17:20-26	Thursday of Week 7 of Easter
18:1 – 19:42	Good Friday
18:33-37	Christ the King, Year B
19:31-37	Sacred Heart, Year B
20:1-9	Easter Sunday
20:11-18	Tuesday of Easter Week
20:19-31	2nd Sunday of Easter
20:19-23	Pentecost Sunday, Year A
21:1-19	3rd Sunday of Easter, Year C
21:1-14	Friday of Easter Week
21:15-19	Vigil of Peter and Paul, June 29th
21:15-19	Friday of Week 7 of Easter
21:20-25	Saturday of Week 7 of Easter