

BIBLICAL RESOURCES

Isaiah 49:3, 5-6; Psalm 40 (39); 1 Corinthians 1:1-3; John 1:29-34

Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world

John 1:29 The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! 30 This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’ 31 I myself did not know him; but I came baptising with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.”

32 And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. 33 I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptise with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptises with the Holy Spirit.’ 34 And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.”

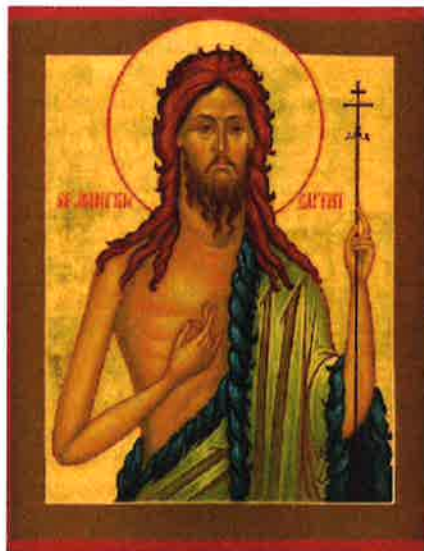
INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

In the tradition of the liturgical year, there are three “epiphanies” of Jesus: the first is the feast of the Epiphany (Jan 6), the second is the Baptism of the Lord (the following Sunday) and the third is the Wedding Feast of Cana (the next Sunday). With the current three-year lectionary, the Cana story is read in the year of Luke. For the other two years, an “epiphany” moment from John’s Gospel is used—today it is the witness of the Baptist to Jesus.

It is very often the case in the Fourth Gospel that we are (over)hearing not the historical words of John (or others) but rather the theology, the spiritual teaching of the evangelist.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join



its closest neighbour in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. (Ex 12:1-8)

KIND OF WRITING

This is quite scenic, even theatrical writing. The author uses considerable freedom to create a narrative which makes John the Baptist identify Jesus and reveal him to Israel. This is unlikely to be historical—witness the questions of the Baptist in Matthew 7:18-20 and parallels. The language used is thoroughly Johannine: the next day: 1-1-0-5; lamb: 0-0-0-2; sin 6-7-11-17; world: 9-3-3-78; this is the one: 14-4-7-18; revealed: 0-3-0-9; witness: 1-0-1-33; remain or

Thought for the day

In John’s Gospel, the first thing that any human being says of Jesus is found on the lips of John the Baptist: Look, there is the Lamb of God. We think naturally and correctly of the Passover lamb and of the Passover, the feast which marks the liberation of Israel. To be set free is a wonderful experience and we could reflect on how I experience my freedom in Christ. From what have I been set free? (For example, fear of death, the risk of absurdity, sins and false directions in life...) Even more important, for what have I been set free?

Prayer

Jesus, Lamb of God, help me to recognise whatever in me is holding me back from life in abundance: give me your life, your forgiveness, your healing. In you, I put my trust.

abide: 3-2-7-40; know: 24-21-25- 84; send: 4-1-10-32.

This means we are dealing with a text full of Johannine vocabulary and theology. Everything in this Gospel is really centred on Christ and these scenes represent a remarkable theology of the identity of Jesus, the risen Lord present in the community of faith.

Day 1 *scene one:* “who are you?” 1:19-23

scene two: “why to you baptise?” 1:24-28

Day 2 *scene three:* “the purpose of John’s baptism” 1:29-31

scene four: “the identity of Jesus, baptiser in the Spirit” 1:32-34

The opening narrative of the Fourth Gospel is carefully choreographed. The author is keen to relate and distinguish the persons and roles of John and Jesus. All four scenes are connected (notice the number of denials by John) and lead to the climactic identification of Jesus. John the Baptist gives the first “human” reaction to Jesus in the Fourth Gospel and the image used—Lamb of God—is heavy with meaning.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

(i) Jesus as the Lamb of God: the author has several things in view. Firstly, Jesus fulfils the symbolism of the Passover of Lamb, bringing a new liberation by his death. Secondly, Jesus is delivered to death at the moment when the slaughter of the Passover lambs started (Jn 19:14). There is some link with the Good Shepherd language and laying down one's life for the sheep.

(ii) The pre-existence of the Word is already plain from John 1:1-18 ("John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'" (John 1:15). Later in the Gospel, at the expense of grammar, theology is made clear: "Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.'" (John 8:58)

(iii) Jesus is the sender of the Spirit in the Fourth Gospel: John 14:16-17, 26; 15:26; 16:7, 13; 19:30; 20:22.

(iv) "The one sent me" is practically a name for God in this Gospel: John 1:33; 4:34; 5:24, 30, 37; 6:38-39, 44; 7:16, 28, 33; 8:16, 18, 26, 29; 9:4; 12:44-45, 49; 13:20; 14:24; 15:21; 16:5. The really pregnant text which combines (iii) and (iv) is: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:21-23).

ST PAUL

Your boasting is not a good thing. Do you not know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. Therefore, let us celebrate the festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. (1 Cor 5:6-8)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 29 John and Jesus seem not to meet in this Gospel (the baptism as such is not recounted here). Again, nothing prepares us for the identification of Jesus with the Lamb of God. It is historically most unlikely that John the Baptist made such a proclamation. Rather, we have here the spiritual teaching of the Fourth Gospel, which does indeed identify Jesus as our Passover Lamb, as is evident in the details of the death of Jesus in this Gospel: noon, hyssop, not breaking the bones. Noon was the established time

when it was permitted to begin slaughtering the Passover lambs (John 19:14). Hyssop is impractical for sustaining a sponge, but it echoes the instructions for the Passover (John 19:29). The breaking of the legs is found only in this Gospel; again, it echoes the instructions for the Passover lamb (John 19:33). The human issue of sin (sin as such, and not sins) will be "resolved" by Jesus as he discloses the astonishing love of God both in his teaching and in his "lifting up". Cf. *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.* (John 3:16)

Verse 30 Johannine anxiety about the relatedness and distinction of Jesus and John comes to the fore. Once more, this high Christology represents the teaching not of John the Baptist, of course, but that of the evangelist and his community. Although it seems historically unquestioned that John was the older of the two, here "he was before me." This takes us back to the deep origins of Jesus in God, as explored in the Prologue of John. Cf. John 8:58 above.

Verse 31 Behind the deep theology may be a factual memory of John's genuine ignorance of the person he was sent to introduce. There may also be historical fidelity in the limited revelation to Israel. This Gospel knows that Jesus is the saviour of the world, but John—in fact—had a mission only to Israel. John's baptism is "only" symbolic; Jesus' baptism will confer the reality, the Holy Spirit.

Verse 32 In this verse we come as near as this Gospel will allow us to the baptism of Jesus by John, one of the most certain things about the life of the historical Jesus. (See the previous Sunday's notes for an explanation of this reticence.) However, the baptism is actually not recounted, although the accompanying symbols indicating a transcendent experience are indeed present. The witness of John is given first, and only then the chronologically prior revelation from God. Witness is a hugely important term for the Fourth Gospel and here John is shown as the first, truthful witness about Jesus.

Verse 33 The interpretation, given before to John, is only now recounted, almost as a confirmation before and after the fact. That the Spirit remains/abides is a key because Jesus will give the Spirit in such a new way that it is almost as if there were no Spirit active before him.

Verse 34 "Seen and testified" — all pure Johannine language. "Son of God" is used more frequently of Jesus in this Gospel than in any other (8-8-10-18). Cf. *We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us — we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.* (1John 1:1-4)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The words of John point to a deep recognition of Jesus' identity. Can I recall times when this recognition took place for me, first of all on a human level, and then on the faith level?
2. John the Baptist admits to not knowing him—a place of real honesty which is the beginning of the pilgrimage of faith. At some point, perhaps, I heard the words of the Psalmist in my heart: a voice I did not know said to me, I freed your shoulder from the burden (Ps 81).
3. What is my own conviction about being sent and about the one sending me? Prayer of call and response.
4. Jesus baptises with the Spirit—a baptism I too have received, perhaps too young. In later life, there can be an awakening of the Spirit, an inner hunger and thirst, a sense of the Spirit's help in our weakness. Prayer of Romans 8:26-27.
5. Witness is the key. Who have been witnesses to me of the Good News? To whom am I today a witness? Prayer of 1 John 1:1-4.

PRAYER

Merciful God, you sent your Son, the spotless Lamb, to take upon himself the sin of the world.

Make our lives holy, that your Church may bear witness to your purpose of reconciling all things in Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.