Sermon for 2nd of Easter Year A

Readings: 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31

i

The New Testament wasn’t written just for the Church. It was written for the world. In the first instance, it was the written testimony of apostolic witness to the events surrounding the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus in order to preserve and teach the faith to those who decided to follow Christ. In the second instance, it had to tell that story in a language that those first believers could understand. That doesn’t just mean it had to be in Greek and in later times Latin rather than Aramaic in order to be comprehended, but it had to use the religious language of the day to express their new faith.

John’s Gospel is the last of the four to be written and so reflects the growing need of the Church to take to the world stage to express their new faith in words and concepts current in the various religions of the day beyond Judaism. These other religions leave their mark in the vocabulary we find in John’s highly distinctive version of the Christian story.

To see John’s skilful use of non-Jewish words and concepts to speak to the world of his day about his new faith in Jesus Christ is an object lesson to us today in evangelisation. When I have shown a few examples of what I mean, I hope you will be challenged to think what words and concepts we need to employ today to speak in a language our contemporaries can comprehend.

ii

Let us touch lightly on three types of religious language which John uses to communicate his new religion in Christ: Greek philosophical faith, Mystery religions and Gnostic traditions.

We are not talking about Plato and the glorious days of the 5th century before Christ, but the 1st century AD of popular Greek culture. It was a way of thinking about the world many inherited without ever reading Plato himself, a bit like cultural Christianity today. It spoke of ‘this world’ as being somehow unreal, a poor reflection in flesh and physicality of the ‘real world’ which they believed was heavenly and spiritual. How telling that today we use the term ‘real world’ in the opposite sense.

The divine principle, the Logos, permeated the material world, especially the rational faculty of the human mind. The Logos (or Word) denotes what is true, authentic and eternal about the cosmos.

John uses the same phrase, Logos, in his opening chapter, and we hear Jesus say again and again that he is the ‘true vine’, the ‘true light’, the ‘true bread’ and the way the truth and the life. But unlike the Greek understanding of the divine spark of the Logos in each human mind, John says that although every man who comes into the world is enlightened by the true light (1:9), when Jesus the true light was made manifest, he was **not** received by his own (1:11).

This is a shocking new twist to Greek hearers. Their logic would have assumed that people would instinctively accept the light that was already within their rational mind. But John is saying to these hearers that people are not born with any innate faculty that guarantees their salvation – all people need something from beyond themselves which only Christ can bring. The ‘natural’ human reaction is to reject the ‘true light’ which Christians attribute to sin.

John also engages with the world of the Mystery religions which were popular at the time. Those religious cults offered their own stories of a saviour who came from heaven, who overcame death and who would share divine life with those who were admitted to the mysteries of the cult. The Christian parallels are obvious.

But John has a shocking twist for the Mystery cults as well. Unlike the mythic stories of past heroic saviours they told, John told of a saviour who actually lived at a certain place at a definite time in the recent past. John’s saviour figure was palpable history rather than just a story. Even the risen Christ can be touched by a doubting Thomas a week after the resurrection in an upper room in Jerusalem.

Gnostic religious tradition is also reflected in the language John uses to explain the gospel in terminology they would understand. Gnostic comes from the Greek word for knowledge: *gnosis*. Salvation was accessed through special knowledge, often quite independent of any requirement for ritual and religious practices. If you are privy to the secret, you will know divine truth and such knowledge is salvation.

John talks frequently about *knowing* Jesus.

“This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3).

John avoids using the noun, knowledge (gnosis) perhaps to avoid confusion with Gnostic religions, but does employ the verbs, to know and to see.

For this is the shocking twist for Gnostic traditions, that Jesus is not merely some eternal principle or secret truth that is woven in to the fabric of the universe, although John says: “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made” (1:3). What is shocking to Gnostic believers is that Jesus became flesh and blood. Some forms of Gnostic faith practised self-mortification to withdraw from the world of mere flesh, but Christianity affirms this world.

Indeed, John says that this physical world can be the vehicle for knowledge of the spiritual world, and physical things like bread and wine may convey divine grace to the believer. We recall John 6:53 “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.”

John has a peculiar way of speaking about knowing Jesus. John talks about “believing into Jesus Christ” and often uses elaborating verbs such as following, abiding, loving, keeping his word, receiving him, seeing him, and so on. These words are holistic, relational words. Christians do not know ‘about’ Jesus as if knowing something about his life, death and resurrection will grant salvation. Many people may ‘know’ that Jesus Christ is supposed to have been the Son of God and have risen from the dead without actually believing it.

When Christians use the term ‘knowing’ Jesus they are using it in a different way to the Gnostics. Christians ‘know’ Jesus in terms of a living relationship. That is what ‘knowing and ‘believing’ mean in Christian language.

iii

The cradle in which Christian faith was born was Judaism. That is a broad definition in itself as we are made aware week after week of the different theological positions of the Sadducees, Pharisees, zealots, Essenes and so on. But the spiritual furniture of Christianity is Jewish. This fact presents the gospel writers with a difficult task to show how Christian faith is both a continuation and fulfilment of Jewish hopes and yet also an historic breach. Jesus inherits the faith of Abraham, but in fulfilling it, takes it in a new direction.

We can see the essence of this new direction in our two readings today.

The account of Jesus’ resurrection appearance to the disciples in the upper room shows the transformation of doubting Thomas through an encounter with a palpable, living, risen Lord into a trailblazing pioneer that many are destined to follow when he declares Jesus to be: “My Lord and my God!” (20:28).

This was a shocking twist for the Jewish community not simply because Jesus was the one put to death as a blasphemer, but also because resurrection was supposed to happen at the end of the world, on the Day of Judgement.

So Christian faith was a shock because God seems to have said they had got it wrong about Jesus and also a shock because of the hope of resurrection life being brought forward in time to the present moment. Heavenly life becomes a present reality that can be experienced by those who believe in Jesus.

In the reading from 1 Peter 1:3-9 we see how Christian theology claims not only the future direction of Judaism into Christianity, but also the history of Jewish faith too. It was the “spirit of Jesus” who motivated and led the prophets of old (1:11). The life of heaven has started now through faith in Christ – for today believers may know that they have an inheritance safely waiting in heaven (1:4).

The ‘real world’ isn’t in heaven or on earth; the ‘real world’ exists when those two worlds are brought together in Christ, the one who restores the bond between heaven and earth after that unity was broken in the Garden of Eden. Now God can once again walk in the cool of the day among his children – through the mystery of the Holy Spirit given to those who believe. At the end of time those two new worlds will be brought together in harmony for eternity.

To live in this world as if it is the only world is spiritual death; to live in this world denying its worth and wishing to escape its clutches is unenlightened blasphemy; true life is found by those who live within the midst of that mysterious tension where the two worlds are brought together in Christ and the life of earth becomes also the foretaste of the life of heaven.

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard**

**June 2016**