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SIMON VIBERT

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# Lives Jesus Changed: Character Studies in John's Gospel

**In this article Simon Vibert briefly introduces some of the dominant themes in John's Gospel before examining how John develops his narrative through stories of individuals and groups who display differing responses to the person of Jesus Christ. The people we meet act as mirrors, reflecting aspects of Jesus' character to the audience. Through unpacking the positive and negative reactions to their growing awareness that Jesus might be the Christ, they enable readers to examine Jesus Christ for themselves and make their own response to the Word made flesh. The article shows that, whether this is a journey towards belief in Jesus as the Christ and life in His name (John 20:31) or glimpses of God's glory that blind or dazzle and drive people away, John's Gospel provides us with a vivid photo album of lives Jesus changed.**

John's Gospel has long fascinated readers, not least because of the way in which it combines some of the most profound gospel content in an accessible earthy narrative. In my own personal library, commentaries on John cover more inches of shelf space than any other book of the Bible.

Our love for John is undisputed. However, our ability to get a handle on the central themes and messages of John is less clear. This article will explore some of the key themes of the Gospel and reach the tentative conclusion that the profundity and the simplicity of the Gospel is best accessed through an examination of the lives Jesus changed when he walked the earth as the Word made flesh. We shall begin our look at the narrative structure of John by rehearsing some of the grand themes of the Gospel.

## **Beginning at the beginning....**

To begin at the beginning is to begin in John 1:1. As has often been noted, all good stories begin 'once upon a time'. Not so John. Its beginning – 'In the beginning was the Word' – instead has strong echoes of "In the beginning ... God" in Genesis 1:1.

Many have wondered why exactly John begins in this way. Speculation surrounds the extent to which John may have borrowed from material that was already in circulation. More particularly, as an introduction to what follows, John

1:1-18 does not seem to read as an anticipation of all that follows and the reader searches in vain for a careful unpacking of the themes of John 1:1-18 in the rest of the Gospel.

Having acknowledged this, we note that John puts down several markers in his opening verses which do set the scene for what follows.

### **The Word made flesh**

Although we can miss this fact due to our familiarity with the passage, not least through its regular reading at Christmas, it is not until verse 17 that the writer confirms that it is Jesus Christ to whom he is referring. Why does John employ this rather mysterious phrase: The Logos? The Word?

Commentaries on John usually come up with three main suggestions, relating the word to rationality, to wisdom and to communication. It is, of course, quite possible that John has more than one audience in mind (he may, for example, be thinking of both Jews and Gentiles) and we must recognise the fact that John is also a master of *double entendre*. We therefore do not need to come to a firm conclusion over which of the three possible meanings might be dominant but can learn from them all.

### **Rationality**

The first readers of John's Gospel were native Greek-speakers and they would have been very familiar with the concept of *logos*. Dating back to the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclites (c.500BC) the word came to refer to cataloguing, ordering, and sequential thought. (A number of English words, including 'logical' and 'catalogue' show their etymological indebtedness to this Greek concept). In the Gospel it is certainly true that Jesus is seen as the logical coherence of this world. He is the world's architect and builder. Through Him all things were made and nothing was made without Him. He is the Divine Reason for the cosmos.

### **Wisdom**

The idea of *logos* as 'wisdom' spans the gap between Greek and Hebrew ways of thinking. The Greek sophists saw knowledge as the height of human development and Plato and Socrates developed the concept. God is the 'big idea', the seat of all knowledge and wisdom. The Stoics came to see *logos* as the bridge between the material world and the world of the divine.

In Hebrew thought, the wisdom emphasis in the Old Testament is found particularly in Proverbs (see, for example, Prov. 22:17; 8:22-36) but also in the prophetic writings where the wise God reveals His plans through His prophets.

Witherington and Dodd might therefore well be right when they observe that the 'wisdom trajectory' of the prologue is all-important.<sup>1</sup> The Word who becomes flesh is none other than the wisdom of God. The Word speaks truth and also promises his disciples that he will send the Spirit who will lead them into all truth (1:14, 17; 'I tell you the truth' 1:51 etc. 16:13).

Although rationality and wisdom are important in understanding John's Gospel, perhaps more significant to the theme of the book as a whole is the dominant idea of 'Word' as 'communication'.

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<sup>1</sup> Witherington 1995: 21.

## Communication

God's Word is God in action. This is a concept which would be particularly familiar to John's Jewish readers:

- God acts in creation through the word: 'By the word of the Lord were the heavens made...' (Psalm 33:6).
- God acts in re-creation through the word: '... so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.' (Isaiah 55:6).

The 'word of the Lord' in Hebrew thought is not dry, arid or academic. God's word is creative and life-giving. Through his word God created the world, and through his word he still re-creates with new spiritual life.

These two ideas come out very clearly in John's Gospel: Jesus, the creator of this world, through His Word brings men and women to new life. The Word who made the world is active in seeking out and having ongoing communication with the people he has made.

To know the Father is to know the Son, is to have eternal life (John 17:3). It is through the Word that this happened. More specifically, Jesus says (v 8) He has given the disciples God's words (the Greek word here is *rhemata*) in order that they may know that he comes from the Father and they are to obey his words (vv 6,8).

Beasley-Murray recalls a conversation with C.H. Dodd in which he sees Jesus presented in John as both the giver of God's gifts, and indeed the gift itself:

As Jesus gives life and is life, raises the dead and is the resurrection, gives bread and is bread, speaks truth and is the truth, so as he speaks the word He is the Word.<sup>2</sup>

The clear implication is that the reason the Word became flesh is not solely that he might be another messenger or witness to the Father. Rather, he is to be the message! John the Baptist is the Voice, the Messenger. Jesus on the other hand is the Word, the Message. The Word came to bring life to the people of God, to bring grace and truth, to make the Father known.

## Other key themes

In addition to the theme of the Word made flesh, there are a number of other important key themes in the first half of John which are worth reminding ourselves of before turning to look more specifically at Jesus' encounters with individuals.

### 'Greater than' sayings

Particularly in John you have Jesus' assertion that he is greater than the key heroes of the Old Testament. He sets himself up as:

- One who is greater than Jacob (4:12) who gave the well at which he meets the woman of Samaria. He offers her a spring of water to eternal life.
- One who is greater than Moses (6:32ff.) who parted the waters and gave them manna from heaven. He will walk the waters and give them true bread.

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<sup>2</sup> Beasley-Murray 1987: 10.

- One who is greater than Abraham (8:53) for it is by receiving Jesus, not through natural descent, that his followers may become children of God (cf. 1:12f.).

### **Fulfilment themes**

In John, Jesus is also portrayed as the one who fulfils all of the great feasts:

- Half way through the Feast of Tabernacles Jesus calls people to himself and promises that he alone can pour out God's Spirit on whomever He will (7:37-38).
- At the Feast of Dedication, having emphasised that he alone is the true light of the world, Jesus makes a bold claim from which they clearly infer He is setting Himself up as God (10:31f.).
- The dominant feast fulfilment is the Feast of the Passover. John the Baptist is heard to cry 'Look, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' (1:29). This is particularly significant in John's chronology because he places Jesus' trial and declaration of innocence by Pilate alongside the rigorous scrutiny of the unblemished Passover lamb and its slaughter as a commemoration of God's rescue from judgement (19:14, 31-37).

### **Truth**

Many other fulfilment themes are included by John. Particularly dominant is the idea that Jesus is the 'true' or 'authentic' reality of that which was anticipated in part in the old dispensation.

- Jesus works on the Sabbath, because it was acknowledged even God had to do that (5:16-18).
- The true temple is not the bricks and mortar which took forty-six years to assemble, but rather his body, through which a true sacrifice will be made (2:19-21).
- Jesus is the bread given by God, come down from heaven. But unlike the manna of old, by eating this bread they may have life (John 6:32-51).
- Jesus is the good or true Shepherd who will give his life for the sheep (10:11-18). He is true light for the entire world (8:12).

### **"7" keys**

The number 7 is clearly of some importance for John. This is signalled in various ways, most noticeably:

- The seven 'I am' sayings – Jesus claims to be the bread of life, the light of the world, the gate, the good shepherd, the resurrection and the life, the way the truth and the life, and the true vine. The 'I am' (*ego eimi*) here can be seen as a claim to deity. This claim arises in part because of the strong association with the divine name as revealed to Moses and held in high honour by the Jews (Exodus 3) but also, from the perspective of the narrative, the extreme reactions which are recorded when Jesus uttered these words implies that at least some of his listeners concluded he was blaspheming (e.g. 6:60ff.; 8:12ff., but particularly 8:58f.)
- The seven signs – Jesus turns water into wine, cleanses the Temple, heals the royal official's son, heals the paralysed man, feeds 5000, heals the blind man

and raises Lazarus from the dead. The 'signs' are clearly of key significance to the structure of the first half of the book and John states that the recording of these signs is part of the reason for writing his Gospel (20:30f.).

## The structure of the Gospel

One must concur with C.K. Barrett's statement that 'the structure of the Gospel is simple in outline, complicated in detail'.<sup>3</sup> Morris divides the Gospel into '7 signs and 7 discourses', whilst Malkuzhyil distinguishes 'the book of signs' (chapters 2-12) and 'the book of Jesus' hour' (or, Dodd, 'the book of the Passion', chapters 13-20).

Whichever way you break down the book, it is clear that the book splits into roughly two equal parts with the emphasis of the first half being on 'the Word become flesh, making the Father known' (through words and deeds) and the second half slowing down time, preparing the disciples for the events of the crucifixion and resurrection.

My difficulty with attempts to isolate any one of the above themes as being the critical interpretative key to unlocking the Gospel of John is not because of any lack of evidence for their existence. Rather I am left with a question over whether any one of the above themes is sufficiently all-encompassing to unlock the central purpose of the book.

## ...and Ending at the end

Clearly the Prologue (1:1-18, which we've already examined), and the Epilogue (21:1-25) of the Gospel set the context for the whole of the intervening narrative. They act as bookends to the central message, with the core of the Gospel (1:19-20:29) then split into two roughly equal halves. Recognising this, Jacques Ellul has an interesting take on the function of the *inclusio* (1:19 – 20:29) which focuses on the theme of 'seeing and believing'.<sup>4</sup> He thereby gives a possible paradigm for viewing the Gospel as a whole.

## Revelation

'No one has ever seen God' (1:18), but the 'Word became flesh and we have seen his glory' (1:14). So, for a time, the invisible God became visible. Hence, the invitation to faith is an invitation to 'come and see!' (1:46; 20:27, 29). John the Baptist and others can testify to what they have seen with their own eyes. It is, however, only the eyes of faith that see the Father's glory and put their trust in him (1:15; 2:11). From now on, in succeeding generations, those who are blessed are those who have not seen yet believe on the evidence provided by witnesses who did. Faith today is thus an invitation to 'come and see' but, since Jesus' departure into heaven, it is those who believe without seeing who are blessed (20:29). For a short while, however, sight and faith were brought together in the incarnate Son.

## John's explanation of why he wrote

This insight ties in, it seems to me, with John's own testimony.

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that

3 Barrett 1955 [1972]: 11.

4 Ellul 1985.

Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:30-31, NIV)

Though Thomas is the Patron Saint of Science, and his name is usually prefixed with the word 'doubting', John does not seem to portray him in that way. Thomas was not with the disciples when Jesus first appeared raised from the dead (20:24), and when Jesus invited Him to look and handle his resurrected body, he responds with the clearest profession of faith in the Gospel 'My Lord and my God' (20:28). Thomas 'saw and believed' but from now on, all future disciples will be those who 'will not see and yet believe' (20:29). They will come to believe on the basis of the miraculous signs recorded in John's Gospel, which are intended to lead to belief that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and 'that by believing you may have life in his name.' (20:30f.).

This explanation of the purpose of the Gospel is straight forward but, as many have observed, John does not read like a record of signs. It is clearly an invitation to faith and the signs point beyond themselves to a community of people who have come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

From John's purpose statement we could infer that he has a non-Christian audience in mind, that his primary audience is those who will come to believe through reading his book. Hence we often offer John as the first piece of Bible literature to the enquirer. But there is a deeper profundity here, which is also designed to strengthen the belief of those who have already known life in Jesus' name. There are also a number of indications that his Gospel is designed to strengthen the faith of new Jewish converts, hence the oft-quoted saying: 'John is a pool where children may paddle and elephants may wade'.

The narrative does not just record the signs, but rather emphasises the fact that these were done in the presence of his disciples, many of whom came to have life in his name. It is the impact of what they saw and subsequently believed that interests John.

In the light of this survey of key themes for interpreting the Gospel and John's own explanation of why he wrote, I want to suggest that John records a series of human encounters between Jesus and individuals or groups of people in order that we may see, reflected in their response to him, models (or anti-models) of belief in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. It is these earlier human encounters with Jesus that lead to Thomas being the climactic and archetypal model of a life Jesus changed.

## **Lives Jesus Changed**

Because, as we've seen, John's Gospel is full of lofty themes and *double entendre* it is easy to neglect the down-to-earth human drama as it unfolds. My proposal is that through the lives Jesus changes (not always in the direction of fully fledged faith) John constructs a composite picture of the Son of God through people's reactions to Him.

Early in the Gospel, John the Baptist is introduced as the one who bears witness (so: 1:19ff; 3:22ff; 4:39ff; 5:31ff). He thereby sets up the important place of testimony

and human attestation to Jesus' identity. This culminates in John himself, the beloved apostle, as an eyewitness (20:30; 21:24-25) whose evidence is to be trusted.

Commenting on the John the Baptist narrative in John 1 Muilenburg says

In general the order of the testimony is cumulative. At first it is only John who wins our attention, but John's mission is a self-effacing one. There is the Unknown One who stands over and against him. Then the Unknown One appears, a momentous claim is uttered, but this falls out of the cumulative order. It is the Coming One, the One whom John knew not, that appears. The heavenly token reveals One who baptises not in water, but in the Holy Spirit. And John bears witness that this is the Son of God. Then the mission begins. The disciples seek, and find, the Messiah, the one foretold by Moses and the prophets. Nathaniel's experience culminates in the witness of "Son of God" and "King of Israel".<sup>5</sup>

So, particularly in the first half of the Gospel, the first twelve chapters, we have disciples and crowds; we meet hostile groupings primarily from the Jewish establishment; and there are several larger than life individuals whose testimony should be attended to. The writer seems to be saying to us: 'the best evidence for who Jesus is, is to be found in the lives he transformed – look at their cumulative testimony as I have recorded it!'

Ben Witherington makes the point well:

What we have leading up to Easter is a series of people on the way to becoming full-fledged Christians. Whether we think of Jesus' mother, the Samaritan woman, Nicodemus, Peter or others. The process of coming to adequate faith is described, and is seen by the end of the Gospel to involve more than just belief in Jesus' signs. It must entail a belief in Jesus as divine Son of God, having come from and returned to God, and having been glorified in his death, resurrection, and exaltation. This Gospel wishes to make abundantly clear the extent of what one must believe about the person and works of Christ.<sup>6</sup>

To explore this further we will look at three major encounters in some detail and then at three lesser examples.

### **Nicodemus – an emerging faith (3:1-16)**

The first lengthy individual encounter John records is between Jesus and Nicodemus. As we progress through the dialogue the reader is drawn into a sympathetic association with this inquisitive religious leader. We know he is a Pharisee, an intelligent member of the ruling party (who are generally known to be fastidious over matters of the law and, in John, largely hostile towards Jesus, 3:1).

He came at night. Was this out of nervousness of being seen associating with Jesus? Was this out of deference for Jesus? Clearly he feels that he is speaking for others ('we know', v 2) but he is also, later, to distance himself from their blinkered condemnation of Jesus (7:45-52).

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5 J. Muilenburg 'Literary Form in the Fourth Gospel' in Stibbe 1993: 76.

6 Witherington 1995: 31.



Nicodemus affords Jesus dignity and respect. He honours him with the title 'Rabbi' and recognises that the miracles which Jesus does indicate that God must be with him.

Nevertheless, the bold challenge Jesus makes in v 3 clearly confuses Nicodemus. He assumes that Jesus is proposing some literal rebirth which, aside from anything else, is a physical impossibility (v 4)! 'How can this be?' Nicodemus asks. Jesus seems (v 10) to be saying to him: 'Nicodemus, despite your great learning, you are very confused about spiritual things'. Jesus implies that there is good precedent for such a way of thinking.

Perhaps Jesus has in mind a passage such as Ezekiel 35:25-27, which speaks of washing with water, a new heart and the promise of God's Spirit living within. There also seems, in the necessity to be born again, a clear allusion to the incident in Numbers 21:8-9: when God judged the people of Israel by sending venomous snakes, he also alleviated their distress by instructing Moses to make a bronze snake, lift it up and invite all who look to the snake to be saved. John 12:32 has this same emphasis on *looking up to* or *looking to with the eyes of faith* in order to be saved by the Son of Man: whoever looks to the Son of Man in this way will receive eternal life. Hence, in John 3:16, the belief in the Son of God which leads to life in his name (cf. 20:30) is none other than looking to Jesus for rescue from the judgement of God.

Nicodemus fades out of the conversation in John 3 and one is left wondering: 'Did he himself ever look to the Son in that way?'. He reappears again in John 7:50-51 as one who is keen that Jesus is given a fair hearing. Then, in 19:39-42, Nicodemus ensures that Jesus' body is buried with dignity, providing seventy-five pounds of myrrh and aloes, at considerable personal expense.

Nicodemus is there described (19:39) as the one who 'earlier had visited Jesus at night'. In the drama of John's narrative we are left asking, 'did Nicodemus come out of darkness into light?' It certainly seems possible. And it may be that John is keen to emphasise that the journey from darkness to light, from curiosity to conversion, is a slow, emerging faith.

### **The Woman of Samaria – learning through questions (John 4:1-39)**

There are a number of similarities between the account of the Woman of Samaria and Nicodemus. Both break away from a predictable reaction to Jesus. Both have questions. Both encounter Jesus at a strange hour. Both misunderstand him, assuming him to be speaking literally when he is speaking spiritually. But there are also some surprising contrasts. To the Pharisee, Jesus speaks of faith in less nuanced, stark terms, rebuking him for his failure to understand the testimony of Scripture: 'you must be born again'. To the immoral Samaritan outcast, Jesus engages in a technical discussion about the location of true worship, concluding 'God is spirit and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth' (v 24). The contrasts in Jesus' approach are striking. Surely we would have reversed those conversations? But perhaps the religious professional needed to hear the stark challenge of religious conversion while the immoral outcast woman needed to hear the assurance of God's interest in her.

Like Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman too has a lot of questions. Some of her questions are of a *religious and racial* nature:

- 'You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?' (v 7)
- 'Are you greater than our father Jacob?' (v 12a)
- 'Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem' (v 20).

Some of her questions are very *practical*. They also reveal that she and Jesus are talking at cross-purposes. 'Where can you get this living water?' clearly implies that she knows Jesus does not have a bucket and the well is too deep. But what he is offering is enticing to her: 'Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water' (v 15).

The dialogue between the woman and Jesus exemplifies the Johannine theme of the danger of superficially misreading Jesus. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it (John 1:5). Jesus speaks of something which is very ordinary, but he has a deeper meaning in mind. She is spiritually thirsty and he promises to satisfy her with living water. Again there are parallels elsewhere in the Gospel. When Jesus told Nicodemus he had to be born again, he asked very practical questions about the impossibility of going back inside his mother's womb. When Jesus gave them bread to eat in the feeding of the 5000 he spoke about living bread that came down from heaven and rebuked them that all they seemed to want to do was to fill their stomachs.

In the narrative we see Jesus gently moving the woman's conversation on from a preoccupation with physical realities to a conversation about spiritual realities. There are depths which she has not yet fathomed.

Some of the questions asked have to do with the *historical debate between Samaritans and Jews*. She asks 'Are you greater than Jacob who gave us this well?' (v 12). It is important to recognize that the Samaritans actually had quite a lot in common with the Jews. They accepted the first five books of the Bible, but they had built a rival temple on Mount Gerazim and promoted this, rather than Jerusalem, as the key place for worshipping God. From a Jewish point of view, however, the Samaritans were little more than half-breeds (possibly because of intermarriage with the Assyrians), and certainly not 'pure Jews'. Both Jews and Samaritans, however, claimed Jacob as their father. So, when Jesus claims to be greater than Jacob, who gave them the well, he trumps both parties.

The question of vv 20-24 focuses on this issue of *geography*: Where is the right holy site to worship? Is it Jerusalem? Is it Gerazim? Jesus points out that the issue is not where you worship, but that it should be in spirit and in truth. Jesus came 'full of grace and truth' (1:18) and it is only through him that Jew and Samaritan can approach God. He is the new temple (cf. 2:20ff.) and pure worship of God is through him. God is *seeking* such worshippers and will come to find one such even in this Samaritan woman.

The woman had a number of questions – religious, racial, practical, historical, geographical – and Jesus patiently answers all of them.

At the same time we observe Jesus doing a bit of probing himself. He touches on a core ethical issue: 'Go, call your husband'. (v 16ff.). We might expect that this would make her run, but she doesn't. Rather, the light is beginning to crack through her darkness and she starts to make some important theological deductions: 'You are a prophet' she asserts (v 19). She seems stunned that Jesus knows her, rather like Nathanael was when Jesus revealed his knowledge to him (1:48-49).

Like Nicodemus, the woman's understanding is growing. By the end, she has drawn others into a confidence that Jesus is the Christ and that by believing they may have life in His name. We can note the progression in her thinking by the cumulative descriptions of Jesus' identity which are given in the narrative:

- Jesus (v 6)
- Jew (v 9)
- Sir, Lord (vv 11, 15, 19)
- Prophet (v 19)
- Messiah/Christ (vv 25, 29)
- 'I am' (*ego eimi*, v 26)
- Rabbi (v 31)
- Saviour of the world (v 42)

A strange encounter between an isolated woman and a weary traveller results in a life-changing experience. John wants us to read on to the climax of the story in vv 39-42. Not only has she come to believe, as a result of her testimony others have come to believe too, reaching the conclusion that Jesus is indeed the Saviour of the World.

### **Man born blind – dawning light (John 9)**

John appears to allow extended treatment of the man born blind by way of a dramatic extended illustration of the light and darkness theme which he introduced in chapter 1 and runs through much of the first half of the Gospel, climaxing at 8:12.

A man, born blind (illustrative of the wider fallen human condition), comes to see, slowly moving from darkness to light. Notice his developing respect and eventual worship of Jesus Christ:

- 'the one called Jesus' (v 11)
- 'he is a prophet' (v 17)
- the recognition of Jesus as a miracle worker (v 25)
- 'he is from God' (vv 30-33);
- he calls Jesus Lord and worships him (v 38).

As the man's eyes begin to open, so, at the same time, the Pharisees become more and more blind (vv 30-32; vv 39-41). Carson points to the blind man's inclusion in this account as a possible paradigm for Christian conversion amongst Jewish proselytes:

If the setting of this Gospel is ... written toward the end of the first century with the primary aim of evangelising Jews and Jewish proselytes – then John's

readers, if they are becoming sympathetic to Jesus at all, must now identify themselves either with the parents, whose faith was not strong enough to act with courage, or with the healed man, who comes to a growing understanding of who Jesus is. His eyes were opened, physically and spiritually and the frank confession of his new faith, even in the face of distinguished opposition, provides a model for a new generation of Jews and Jewish proselytes who are coming to faith.<sup>7</sup>

The extended narrative treatment of Nicodemus, the Woman of Samaria and the man born blind draws the reader into an identification with them. We too realise that faith grows slowly; we have questions and have found ourselves recipients of Jesus' probing. We are also drawn by the light of Jesus, but surprised by the hostility of those in religious darkness. Here are individuals like us who can reveal to us how Jesus changes lives. There are lots of other lesser examples. Here are three.

### **The disciples – seeing his glory (John 1)**

The disciples respond first to the invitation to 'come and see' (1:39, 46) which in turn becomes an invitation to leave everything and follow Jesus (1:37, 43). It is the disciples who see beyond the sign at the wedding at Cana to the glory of God and thus put their faith in Him (2:11). But John also reminds us that it was only after the fulfilment of the events of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection that the disciples are able to recall what he said and what it meant (e.g. 2:22). John's readers should appreciate the unique privilege of those first disciples who saw beyond the signs and glimpsed God's glory revealed in the Word made flesh.

### **The royal official – taking him at his word (John 4:39-54)**

This incident draws a contrast between the royal official and the sign-seeking Galileans, with v 48 implying a strong rebuke directed at those who will only believe if they see signs. In contrast to such an attitude, the royal official shows a strong desire to take Jesus at his word and journeys back home without Jesus present (vv 47-50). Upon investigation of the news of his son's healing (vv 51-52) he makes a further step of trust and faith in Jesus which concludes with the remark 'So he and all his household believed' (v 53b).

John wishes his readers to appreciate that an invitation to faith is first an invitation to take Jesus at his word. Once the evidence cumulates, faith grows into full-fledged belief.

### **The paralysed man – wishing to be well (John 5:1-15)**

It seems as though Jesus in part heals this man in order to provoke a discussion/ conflict about the nature of the Sabbath. However, Jesus also has specific concern for this individual. Jesus initiates the conversation and asks the provocative question 'Do you want to get well?' (v 6). The man's response (v 7) shows a misunderstanding of the magnitude of what Jesus is offering similar to that shown by Nicodemus and the Woman of Samaria. Equally provocative is Jesus' command to the man to pick up his mat and carry it on the Sabbath (v 8). This was clearly designed to bring him into conflict with the legalistic Pharisees and, although vv 14ff. are

<sup>7</sup> Carson 1991: 372.

difficult verses, they seem to imply that there is in fact something much worse than physical sickness, namely, a failure to worship the true God.

As a result of this final conversation, John tells us that the man told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. He thus paints the paralysed man as a more complex character than some of the other examples of faith. There is a certain ambiguity here as we are left wondering whether John sees him as a positive example of faith and witness, or as one who, despite being the recipient of a great miracle, joins the Jews in plotting against Jesus (v 15).

## Summary and conclusions

We began by highlighting a number of features of the first half of John's Gospel, particularly related to the themes of fulfilment, and the structural issues surrounding the number seven. We also noted that a key text for understanding the Gospel is 20:30f. in which John explains that the reason he has made a selection from a seemingly vast number of signs (see 21:25) is in order that these may evoke belief that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that by believing, subsequent generations may come to have life in his name.

The central contention, however, has been that primarily in the first half of the Gospel (but also into chapter 20 too, with its story of Thomas) John introduces us to individuals and groupings of people who have been changed by their encounter with Jesus. They reflect back to us their individual and corporate testimony about Jesus Christ.

We are called to note what *they* say about Jesus the Son of God. Their testimony is to be added to that of John the Baptist, John the Apostle, Jesus, God the Father and the Holy Spirit.

We are also called to note what *Jesus* says about himself and his mission in their presence as each personal encounter also provokes a teaching moment. It is in and through Jesus' life-transforming conversations with these people that we learn that

- Jesus is the one who is greater than Jacob who gave the well (4:12)
- Jesus is greater than Moses, he is the one who rides the sea and tames the waters and brings them true bread from heaven (6:12; 6:30ff.)
- Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath (e.g. 5:18f.)
- Jesus is the promised light, bringing light and life to those living in the shadow of death (8:12).

As Witherington comments, quoting Mlakyshtyl

The evangelist has constructed a theological drama which 'manifests the salvific mission and human-divine person of Jesus and the human response of faith or unbelief provoked by his revelation ... for a specific purpose, namely so that the readers may believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the divine Son of God, and that through their personal existential faith in him they may have eternal, divine life'.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Cited from 'Christocentric Literary Structure of the Fourth Gospel' in Witherington 1995: 43.

So, yes, John has given us in his Gospel a portrayal of Jesus' identity as none other than the Son of God, the Word made flesh. He has done so through a record of his words and deeds – the distinctive 'signs' – whilst incarnate on earth. But an often overlooked dimension in the Gospel is the very human drama which it portrays being played out in the lives that Jesus changed, mirroring back to us something of the identity of Jesus here on earth.

This is (recalling the insight of Ellul) what we could have seen ourselves if we had walked where they walked and had we eyes to see what they saw. The key message John would communicate to us in all of this is the necessity of belief in Jesus as Son of God. Through these encounters we discover that, like the Gospel of John itself, belief is a multi-layered thing and, like the blind man, it is revealed to us that our eyes may only open gradually.

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