

## SECOND TALK BY FATHER JOHN HEMER MHM TO THE GRAND PRIORY OF ENGLAND ADVENT DAY OF RECOLLECTION 2011

### Session Two. John's Prologue 1:1-18.

John starts with something very familiar to Jews – God's word. Not exactly what Genesis says, but near enough to get people to hear similarity. God's word is powerful and active. It Gives life: *Take all these words to heart... for the Law is your life and by its means you will live long..*(Deut 32:46-47.) It can heal people *He sent out his word and it cured them.* (Ps. 107:20.) According to Psalm 119 *Your Word is my hope* (81) *Your word is planted firm in heaven* (89) *Your word is a lamp for my feet and a light for my path* (105) *As your word unfolds it gives light and even the simple understand* (130) If we equate God's word with his Law or commandments, which the OT does. It is the most treasured thing there is (Feast of Shimchat Torah) In Genesis it is the agent of creation: And God said: "Let there be light" and there was light. John says: Through him all things came into being, a deeper reflection on what we are told in Genesis.

It is also the prophetic word which is always contending against hardness of heart, speaking on behalf of those who are wronged (see Isaiah 1.) It breaks the silence that no one knew existed, it causes those who did not notice the widow, the orphan etc to see them. On the other hand it causes those who bear it to suffer – think of Jeremiah's confessions. *For whenever I speak, I cry out, I shout, "Violence and destruction!" For the word of the LORD has become for me a reproach and derision all day long.* (Jer. 20:8) In other words: "Because I speak on behalf of those left out, I have become left out." All this is incarnated by Christ the crucified one.

*The word was made flesh* = the entire biblical revelation is contained in life, death & resurrection of this one human being. Bible is true history of the world.

All this is thoroughly Jewish, but how to express it for Greek converts who have never read OT? In Greek Philosophy the Lord, Logos is the eternal principle of order in the universe. For some it was the mind of God, guiding, controlling & directing everything. Later it was considered to be the by which God created and ordered the world. Some have translated the word Logos as 'creative energy'.

Heraclitus stumbled on the truth when he said that the Logos is violence, i.e. violence is the organising principle of the world. There are two *logoi* operating in the world – two forms of coherence, two ways of making meaning. Heraclitus offered a view of origins different from the myths of his time. He sensed that violence behaved with a logic of its own that he called *logos*. He said: “Violence is the father & king of all things. He has shown some to be gods & some mortal (it creates distinction between sacred & profane) He has shown some to be slaves & some to be free (i.e it creates social differentiation) violence is justice & all things come to pass and perish through violence”

The sacred is violence transfigured in a way that must not be approached or recognised or touched. If this seems bizarre, think of honour killings in Islam. Typically a female member of the family will decide to marry someone who for one reason or another is ‘not right’. Her family will, without a qualm of conscience kill her. This is necessary to maintain social order and to give a message to others who may be tempted to do the same. The family would not consider this to be violence but justice and necessary. Violence creates order, and order is the will of God. So such a killing is a holy act. The controlling *Logos* of such a society and of any ancient society is violence.

So many myths begin with violence but they are unconscious. Heraclitus is the first to conceptualise the phenomenon of generative violence. Once this *logos* is in play it turns destructive violence into something that can keep society together. He saw that however random it is, collective violence develops according to certain patterns.

As John lays out his stall, we see through people’s reaction to Jesus that this is indeed the case, and the reader is asked to choose between the *Logos* of this world and Jesus who is the *Logos* from above. (*You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world.*) (8:23.)

Through the Logos all things came to be – it’s only this logos is creative. The violent *Logos* produces structures and order and camaraderie and culture but it does not actually create anything. It’s important to see that there is *logos* rather than *chaos*. The modern view that the universe is a purely random set of events with no intelligence behind it is flatly contradicted by the statement that in the beginning there was *Logos* – reason.

A good way to understand this is: “In the beginning God expressed himself. Today people talk about ‘the force’, New agers about ‘cosmic energy’ or ‘the Life principle’ John tells his gentile readers that this force or power that they have always known about is not just something vague and abstract, but actually became visible in a real man. New agers tend to

like their god rather vague and woolly, floating around in the atmosphere and you can get in touch with him (or her) by chanting or hugging a tree. God can be anything you want it to be. John agrees with them that there is such a force, but challenges them by saying that this force entered history in the form of a man. So word means much more to John's readers than to us.

The verb for overpower is **katalamba,nw** this can also mean to understand, to comprehend. The Vulgate has: *et tenebrae eam non comprehenderunt* and the Douai has *and the darkness did not comprehend it*. In other words the forces of this world can't understand it any more than they can really fight it. We have seen that happening with the Papal visit

In Mk 4:41 *Who can this be? Even the wind and the sea obey him*. By the end of Mk we know that this is The son of God. Early church realises that when they met Jesus they met God, but the consequences of that not worked out in synoptics. With more time to reflect John comes to understand that if this is true, then this person must have existed since the beginning. This is not yet the full-blown doctrine of the Trinity, but a recognition that belief in One God is not as simple as we thought. Soon, John will make the connection between this pre-existent word and the earthly Jesus. The power which was instrumental in creation, which inspired all the great OT figures and all the philosophers takes on visible human form in Jesus

In case we start dreaming and get stuck in eternity (as sometimes religious people do) We are brought down to earth. *A man came sent by God. His name was John*. This book will tell us eternal truths, but we can only know them by being here on earth, in history with real people. (People waffle on about love, we can only touch it and know it by loving real individuals.) The author takes us out of eternity which is all beautiful and inspiring, and into history which is often messy and difficult.

Quickly we are told that this Word does not just float around in the ether, but becomes flesh, becomes concretely visible. This has many effects.

All decent people are on the side of light and truth and goodness – theoretically. But when that involves concrete choices, many fight shy. If this truth and light of God take on real visible form in Jesus we are faced with real choice. Many people like their religion and morality vague, general, universal. If the incarnation is true then that position is untenable. I can only show I'm on the side of universal truth by throwing in my lot with a very particular man. The incarnation, the Word coming into the world forces that choice.

“This ‘world’ does not mean our planet; rather it represents the planet's people, especially in its officialdom, who stand opposed to God.

As in the time of Jesus, when religion was embedded in all societal structures, this officialdom often is connected to recalcitrant religious leaders organised in a group. Those members who have come under the power of the group's ideology stand in need of conversion."

Walter Wink has made the helpful suggestion that we can get a sense of the force of 'world' in John if we substitute the word 'system' referring to the domination system, the unjust world order which privileges a few and marginalises and dehumanises many. *You are of this system, I am not of this system* (8:23) gives the sense of what Jesus meant here and avoids the danger of Gnostic dualism

Becoming Children of God is a central issue in John. We tend to say glibly: "we are all God's children." In a certain sense that's true but this is not what John means. Being a 'son' of England or wherever means that my nationality informs to a great extent who I understand myself to be. Likewise when we say: "He's his father's son" we mean that he takes after his father and probably consciously tries to emulate him. But says John, that understanding of ourselves is not enough. To be a child of God means that my self-understanding must come from God and not from something in this world. That which we are born of is perhaps: 'that which makes us tick', the world in which we live. Nicodemus comes to Jesus as a child of Abraham, he has a great pedigree. The thing which gives him his sense of identity is his ancestry. Being Jewish is what makes him tick. Jesus tells him in effect that even that counts for nothing and that he has to be born again to even be able to see the kingdom of God. When people have had the experience of being born again, or a conversion experience, they bear witness to the fact that something else makes them tick, the whole basis of their lives and well-being changes. St Francis said that a Christian is a citizen of no country but the kingdom of heaven. Here he speaks with the profound insight contained in John's prologue

John says that authority to become children of God is given to those who: *are born not of blood nor will of the flesh nor will of man but of God* (Jn 1:13, my trans.) The first expression has puzzled scholars for centuries. The Greek *evx ai`ma,twn ex haimaton* means literally 'of bloods'. If we translate this back into Hebrew the plural, *damim* is quite an ordinary way of talking about 'bloodshed' and maybe this is what John has in mind here. Unfortunately, the fervent defence of propagation of religion has often gone together with bloodshed in the history of the world. Jesus himself said: *The time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is doing a holy service to God.* (Jn. 16:2) Those guided by such religious principles cannot become children of God. (As we shall see whenever John talks about birth or parentage, his is hardly ever talking about the process of human generation) In many societies, both ancient

and modern, the ability to shed blood without qualms was taken as the sign of a real man. There are still whole societies who think like this. “If bloodshed is the price we have to pay in order to do what we want, then we are proud of the fact that we are not afraid to pay it.” And all too often people assume that God is on their side in all this. John is saying emphatically that this cannot be the case. So John is saying that the people who can become children of God are those who are not guided by principles of bloodshed or mere human systems or desires.

Living at a time when we are rediscovering the goodness of the body, we are often disturbed by John’s distinctions between flesh and spirit, so it’s important to understand what he means. If we simplify the distinction between flesh and spirit to something bodily and sexual (as opposed to the things of God which have nothing to do with the body) we side-step the import of the NT. Flesh is every human system of behaviour, even of thought or religion which is opposed to God, which is not enlivened by the spirit of the true God. Remember that pride, which takes place only in the mind, has always been considered a sin of the flesh. When Jesus says to the Jews in Jn. 8:15 *You judge according to the flesh*, The NJB translates this as *You judge by human standards*. Note they are judging him on the criteria of their religion, which they claim was revealed to Moses. So although their standards are religious and have a very good pedigree and have served people well for 1000 years, they are of the flesh. This is so simply because now they oppose the work of God’s spirit which is being revealed in Jesus Christ. Perhaps a parallel would be the very belligerent forms of Catholic traditionalism which oppose Vatican II, judge most of their hierarchy to be unrepentant heretics and do this in the name of true Catholicism. The issues are complex but what is often at stake is an attachment to a certain form of catholic culture rather than the true spirit of Catholicism. There is a denial that any change or development can be good or of the Spirit. In that sense traditionalism, even though it espouses a form of religion which seems to be very ‘spiritual’ is often in fact a work of the flesh in the NT sense. It’s an attachment to a certain human way of understanding which was once embodied the truth, but now resists the work of the spirit, sets itself up in opposition to it, denies that it is the spirit.

In a similar way, biblical fundamentalism which claims the ‘spiritual high ground’ is often very at home with extreme right wing politics. And so while the fundamentalist would claim to be influenced not by the world but only by the spirit of God, his literalist approach to the text means he is closed to any meaning beyond the one he sees. The people who marched to war in the US to defend the right to keep slaves did so with the Bible in their hand and their Bible reading was a major part of the ideological underpinning of the pro-slavery movement. This

kind of Bible reading is clearly a work of the flesh in NT terms. The vocabulary is very spiritual but it resists what God's Spirit is doing.

Conversely, Paul says: in Ephesians 5:28-33

*28. In the same way, husbands must love their wives as they love their own bodies; for a man to love his wife is for him to love himself. 29. A man never hates his own body, but he feeds it and looks after it; and that is the way Christ treats the Church, 30. because we are parts of his Body. 31. This is why a man leaves his father and mother and becomes attached to his wife, and the two become one flesh. 32. This mystery has great significance, but I am applying it to Christ and the Church. 33. To sum up: you also, each one of you, must love his wife as he loves himself; and let every wife respect her husband.*

So the most carnal of unions, the marital union, Paul considers to be something spiritual, something which reflects the union of Christ and the Church. So if we insist on understanding 'flesh' merely as pertaining to the body and the sexual, we close ourselves off to much of what the NT is saying. Of course over-attachment to the things of the body can keep us attached to the flesh, but conversely it is possible for people who are very ascetic still to be living according to the flesh, still to be guided by human concerns rather than the life-giving spirit of God.

To be born of will of the flesh means to understand one's self in purely worldly terms. In American churches there is often a flag in the sanctuary. Perhaps the question John would put is: "If you had to choose between the cross and the Stars and Stripes (or the Union Jack or the Tricolour) which would you choose?" If it's the flag then I am still born of the flesh. If I say: "My God and my country are the same thing", then I am still thinking according to the flesh.

To be born of the will of man seems to have a specific meaning. Here, John does not use the ordinary word for man, *anqrwpoj* (but he says *oujde. evk qelh,matoj avndroj*) This is the technical word for a biological male, not the generic term for a human being. Of course for Jews, their natural birth through Jewish fathers did make them people of God, John says here that this is not the case, this in fact can get in the way.

*The Word became flesh.* John takes a risk using this word, and elsewhere in the gospel it will have a negative meaning, something which is base and only earthly, and in opposition to the work of God: *It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh has nothing to offer.* (6:63) John could have softened this by saying: "The word took on a body" or: "The word assumed a physical form" but he wants us to face the scandal of the incarnation – that the majestic force who makes and sustains the universe limits himself to living in a backward village in a backward province. There were strands in Greek thought which said that the physical world is

only a shadow of the real spiritual world, that our bodies are really just cages in which the soul is trapped. The Gnostics believed that the physical world was evil and the spiritual is good. (Genesis 1 contradicts this. Everything God makes he sees that it is good). Christians have often inherited this un-biblical view. God shows how much he loves the world by becoming a part of it. For the Greeks and millions of modern people – Hindus, Buddhists, new agers of various kinds, salvation, ultimate liberation is being released from the world. They subscribe to the idea that we can only encounter God in the spiritual and that salvation means that God rescues us from the nasty physical world with all its problems and brings us into his nice ‘spiritual’ world.. Instead of doing that for us God gets involved in history and human life. A lot of bad religion concentrates only on the spiritual and ignores people’s physical needs. Or tries to pretend that we can reach God if we by-pass the body. The central, most important fact about Jesus is not his teaching, or what he does, but he becomes one like us. Islam cannot cope with this idea. For Muslims, God is all- transcendent and if he takes flesh he loses that. The risk is that Jesus, becoming flesh will not be recognised as God, just a man. Many saw only the man. But God does take that risk. Flesh is earth bound and perishable, does not seem to be a fitting vessel for God’s mighty purpose. But that’s all we have. We are beautifully human.

*For Christ plays in ten thousand places,*

*Lovely in limbs and lovely in eyes not his*

*To the father through the features of men’s faces*

One of the reasons Protestantism has such problems with the sacraments and the very physicality of Catholicism is they can’t really believe the full truth of the incarnation, that the physical is a way to God, and the way God chose to reveal himself. The word became flesh, and the reformation turned it into word again. The problem with Catholicism is the other extreme. Physical things – candles, bread, water are some of the ways we make our relationship with God. But Catholics can get stuck at the physical thing. Religion can become mechanical and therefore superstitious. People will light a candle in church without saying a prayer and without realising that the candle itself is only a symbol of the prayer being offered. People can use holy things without any relationship with the holy.

Muslims and many Protestants see God as one who simply sends his instructions without really getting involved. That is the nature of the Koran and the way many people think about the Bible – a set of heavenly instructions. New agers like to see Jesus as a wisdom teacher (John’s gospel very vulnerable to that). People want to see religion a collection of beautiful sayings and ideas. Incarnation confounds all that.

“I need someone with skin on”

The Greek of John 1:14 really means *And the word became flesh and pitched his tent among us*. Israel has a strong tradition of talking about God’s presence among his people as ‘God’s tenting’. *Make me a sanctuary so that I can reside among them* (Ex. 25:8-9) *I am the Lord your God who makes his dwelling (pitches his tent) in Zion*. (Joel 3:17) After exile, during rebuilding of Temple; *Sing and rejoice O daughter of Zion, for look I come and I will make my dwelling (pitch my tent) in your midst*. (Zechariah 2:10.) Jesus is now what the Temple was for Israel. If we want to meet God we do that not in a special building, but in Jesus. It was in the Temple that God’s glory was seen, so now *We have seen his glory*. The glory of God shines in what Jesus does. (There is no account of the Transfiguration in John because Jesus’ glory is visible from the wedding at Cana onwards.)

Moses gives the Law – a set of instructions, Jesus gives unsolicited free gift of grace, God giving himself. The heart of the gospel and the thing we have such trouble understanding.

And Finally.....

### **A Thought on the Incarnation.**

My first Christmas as a priest in Africa didn’t start well. I went into the sacristy at 6a.m. to prepare for the three Masses I had in different outstations and realised to my dismay that I was completely alone. Normally two or three of the altar servers would accompany me, set up the altar, serve the Mass and pack everything away. But on this the busiest day of the year, when at each Mass there would be well over a thousand people, I would have to do everything myself. I was angry with the servers for not thinking of me. I was angry with myself, because I should have reminded a few of them that I’d be setting off very early and would need extra help. I was angry that all these people would be having Christmas and enjoying it with their families and here was I...alone. I had worked hard on my sermon that year and was pleased with it, so although I had Christmas well worked out in my head, it certainly was not there in my heart. So, sulking I got all the things together for the Masses, hundreds of hosts, vestments, all the right books, and with a heavy heart walked to the car not looking forward to the long, lonely task ahead. Leaning on the car were Edward and Michael, two lads in their late teens, good lads. “Happy Christmas Father, we’ve come to help you!” Jet black faces, Colgate-white teeth, big beaming smiles. My heart lifted. I wasn’t alone. It was at that moment my Christmas began. They were the best present I could hope for. We set off, chatting and singing carols and had three very long, very crowded masses, at the end of which I came home

tired and satisfied and quite happy to be alone for the rest of the day. For me there was a great lesson there: Despite all my preparations and all my theology, I needed the presence of these two young men to make me feel it was Christmas, to make it real, to make me feel God's presence. God knew that. All the words in the Old Testament, wonderful as they are, could not give us what we really need to feel the touch of God. He had to send us another human being. He had to come as one of us. *For there is a child born to us, a son given to us.* We didn't need more words, we needed a baby