

WEEK 1

ST JOHN & THE EAGLE – AN INTRODUCTION

1. When the Gospel is read at the Eucharist, it is accompanied by certain actions and verbal responses as we welcome the proclamation of the Gospel. It should raise our hearts and minds to be attentive to the word that is being read and to honour the gospel message. In many churches today, the Book of the Gospels is carried in procession and held high. The gospel is often carried into the midst of the people to be read. Traditionally it is read by a deacon or priest and the people stand as a sign of respect and attentiveness. It may be greeted with Alleluias and with incense and in the days before microphones, it was sometimes sung for all to hear. The people are invited to respond at the beginning and ending of the reading but perhaps we have become so familiar with this that it just becomes another part of the service rather than the climax of the Ministry of the Word. For centuries and even today in some cultures, people did not have access to a printed Bible or they were unable to read, so to hear the words of the Gospel was an awesome experience, and it should be for us today because the word 'gospel' means 'good news' – it proclaims the message of Jesus and who and what he is, how he teaches us the way to live and of what he did for us.
2. The Book of the Gospels often has on the cover the symbols for the four evangelists – Matthew Mark, Luke and John. The four symbols have been common in Christian art since the 9th century. They come from the four beasts that the writer saw around the throne in the Book of Revelation. Matthew is symbolised by a human (not an angel as it is sometimes thought) because his gospel focuses on the human nature of Jesus and the importance of the incarnation. Mark is symbolised by a lion, a figure of courage and Mark's message suggests that we have to be courageous to be Christians. Luke is symbolised by an ox, a figure of sacrifice because Jesus is sacrificed on the cross and Christians should be prepared to give their lives for God. The man, the ox and the lion are often depicted as having wings to symbolise the gospel being carried to the four corners of the world. [Some scholars have including William Barclay have the symbols for Matthew and Mark around the other way. John Fenton claims that the lion is the symbol for St John!]
3. But St John is universally symbolised by an eagle because his gospel takes us soaring to new theological and spiritual heights. John's gospel is quite different from the other gospels which are called the Synoptic Gospels because there is a synopsis or similarity among them – but John's gospel is different in almost every way. It is of course revealing the same Jesus because Jesus is the same yesterday, today and for ever, but John gives us new insights into the ministry and message of Jesus.
4. John's gospel omits many things that the other gospels include. John has no account of the Birth of Jesus or his Baptism. He does not record the Last Supper, the time spent in the garden of Gethsemane and there is no mention of the Ascension. There are no accounts of exorcisms in John and no

parables. Parables form an important source of teaching in Matthew, Mark and Luke but you won't find any parables in John's Gospel.

5. John also records the history of the life of Jesus differently. In the Synoptic gospels (Matthew Mark and Luke) Jesus did not begin his ministry until after John the Baptist had been sent to prison, so John the Baptist is sometimes called the forerunner; but in John's Gospel, Jesus and John the Baptist were around preaching at the same time.
6. Another difference between St John and the Synoptic gospels is that in the Synoptic Gospels the focus of Jesus' ministry is around Galilee where he grew up and spent time with his family and with his disciples. He only went to Jerusalem for the last week of his life. But in John, he spends most of his ministry in Jerusalem and Judaea and only occasionally goes home to Galilee. John's account shows Jesus as having spent many months in Jerusalem before the crucifixion – he is there for various feasts – the Feast of Tabernacles, the Feast of Dedication, and the Feast of Passover. St John records Jesus being present at three Passover Festivals but the Synoptic gospels conflate the ministry of Jesus into one year. So who is right? I would suggest that John may be right because if you look at Mark's gospel, you don't need to be a Miss Marples to see how he has recorded events that happened at different times of the year as if they had happened at the same time. As the Synoptic writers only had Jesus in Jerusalem at the end of his earthly ministry they said that was when he cleansed the Temple, but St John says it was on his first visit two years earlier - and yet somehow it fits in better if it happened on the third visit just before his arrest and crucifixion, so the fact that John has placed it as taking place on the first visit may be because that is when it happened, in which case it was surprising that he didn't get an ASBO! The point is that the gospels are not chronological and we can't study them like that – they are trying to convey a message about Jesus not provide a history lesson.
7. I said that John is the eagle gospel because it raises us to new heights. It also has the eyes of an eagle and John alone records some of the wonderful incidents that do not appear in the other gospels – the marriage at Cana, the woman at the Well, the visit of Nicodemus, the raising of Lazarus, the washing of the disciples feet and the wonderful teaching about the Holy Spirit (for which St John uses a special word). St John also gives real character to some of the followers of Jesus – Thomas, Andrew and Philip come alive – and John also includes many little details which suggest that it is the account of an eye-witness.
8. St John has detailed knowledge of the whole of Jerusalem and the countryside around it. He knows the distances between places and he notes those small details that would be noticed by someone who had been present – for example, he says that the lad brought five *barley* loaves, that the grass was green, that the smell of the perfume filled the house and so on.
9. We do not know for certain who wrote John's Gospel or when it was written, but most scholars believe that it was written after the other three

gospels and probably in the latter part of the first century 80-100 AD. But who wrote it? Interestingly, John's gospel does not mention the disciple John but it does refer to 'the one Jesus loved' who was present at the last supper, and at the foot of the cross, and at the trial and the resurrection - and the person who wrote it down is referred to as the 'witness' so it has been suggested that the source of the gospel is that of John the apostle - but that it was not written by John himself but by one of his own disciples. This would make sense because the gospel may have been written some 70 years after the crucifixion and it seems unlikely that John would have referred to himself as the 'one whom Jesus loved'. The word *disciple* means a learner or a pupil and we know that John had disciples whom he taught – one of them was called Polycarp and Polycarp himself also had disciples and one of them was Irenaeus who became the Bishop of Lyon.

10. There is fairly wide agreement among scholars that the Fourth Gospel derives from the apostle John even if it was written down by a pupil and what is significant is that it records years – perhaps 70 years - of reflection and prayer about what Jesus said and did. This is not a gospel that was hurriedly written down but it is the fruit of years of meditation and theological understanding which is why it is so different from the other gospels – this is essentially a **spiritual** gospel and we are invited to study it at that level and to plunge its depths.
11. All the books of the Bible are texts that were written at a particular time by a particular person for a particular purpose, so to try and understand John we have to ask why and for whom it was written. The world in the Middle East in the first century was multi-faith and multi-cultural and John would have been familiar with both the Jewish and Greek cultures of his day. There are many references to Jewish feasts and customs in the gospel and John refers to 'the Jews' 70 times and often seeing the Jewish leaders as opponents of Jesus. Unfortunately, this has led to anti-Semitism when taken out of its historical context – we have to remember that John was writing at a time when the early Christians were being expelled from the synagogues.
12. It has sometimes been said that St Matthew was writing his gospel for the Jews and John was writing his gospel for the Greeks, but I don't think it is as clear as that. I think they were both writing for the Jews and the Greeks, although it is certainly true that John is writing primarily for the Greeks. The Greeks were great thinkers and philosophers – Socrates and Plato were responsible for the ways in which Greeks thought about life, and John wanted to present the gospel to them in a way that they would understand. That of course is one of the challenges of evangelism – to be able to speak about Jesus to people in a way that they will understand.
13. It's not very helpful talking to Eskimos about the desert or children living in cities about shepherds, and John knew that there was no point talking to Greeks about the Messiah because that was a Jewish idea, so the gospel opens with some very clear statements that the Greeks would understand and when most of us hear the first 14 verses of St John's gospel we are likely to say, 'It's all Greek to me as well'. So let's just read those first 14 verses –

it's a most wonderful piece of literature building up to a great climax, 'The word became flesh and dwelt among us'. **Read John 1:1-14**

14. *In the beginning was the Logos* – that Greek word *logos* can mean *word* or *reason* or *logic*. The Jews understand the idea of God's power being the word because it was God's word that created the world. *God said, 'Let us make...'* and the Greeks understood that in creation there is logic, reason, order – because nature has its laws of night and day, the seasons of the year and the movement of the planets and stars, so they believed that the mind of God is responsible for creation and God has implanted in humankind the *logos* to make us rational beings and therefore moral beings. So John is saying to the Greeks that the mind of God has taken human form and lived among us and so in Jesus we see the perfect mind of God. You can read the passage and replace *word* with *reason* and you will hear it as the Greeks would have heard it.
15. So the Greeks believed that behind creation was the *logos* – reason, and they also believed something else. They believed that there existed two worlds – the one in which we live with its imperfections and unrealities, but that there also existed another world which was the real world and this world is only a pale reflection of something much better. Plato went so far as to say when you see a table, it is only a pale reflection of a perfect table that exists in the other real world. [Now I have met some Christians who have a similar philosophy so that they believe that this earth is only a poor reflection of heaven – in heaven there will be perfect weather, free beer, luxurious houses, amazing affordable shopping and everyone will drive a Porsche – well, that's not a biblical view of heaven!]
16. But let me get back to the Greeks. For them the problem was how do you move from this poor world to the perfect world or as they would see it from this false world to the real world. John wanted to tell them that Jesus was the answer because he is the one who came from the real and perfect world to live in this rather messy and imperfect world and he comes with the message that we too can become the children of God and enter the other world.
17. John also wanted to address some of the other ideas that were around at the time – they were *Gnosticism* and *Docetism*. Briefly *Gnosticism* says that matter is evil and the spirit is good – and as God is good and matter is evil, God could not have made the world, so John states in verse 3 *All things were made through him and without him was not anything made that was made*.
18. *Docetism* was derived from *Gnosticism* and comes from a Greek word meaning 'to seem' so they said that Jesus only appeared to be human but he was really divine. If you have ever sung at Christmas 'veiled in flesh the godhead seen to behold the deity' you have been *docetic* – which says that Jesus was not divine but veiled in flesh like some kind of ghost, but he really was flesh and blood and so we read *The Word was made flesh and lived among us*.

19. Let's look a little more closely at the text. It starts with *In the beginning was the Word* and of course it reminds us of the first verses of the Bible. The Book of Genesis begins with the words 'In the beginning' so John is telling us that from before creation Jesus existed, so the incarnation was always part of the divine plan. It wasn't as if God said to himself – I have tried judges and kings and prophets and that hasn't worked, what shall I try next? I know I'll have a son and send him to earth'. No, it was always part of God's plan.
20. *The Word dwelt with God and what God was, the Word was.* This tells us that there is no difference in character between the Father and the Son. We must not think of God the Father as a remote and sometime angry figure whose anger had to be appeased by his loving Son – clumsy preaching sometimes gives that impression – but it is not biblical, as John says *what God was, the word was.*
21. John then introduces the themes of light and life – these are two major themes in the Gospel and I shall be saying more about them next week.
22. He then goes on to introduce John the Baptist *There was a man sent from God whose name was John* and in the Fourth gospel the evangelist John is at pains to point out that John the Baptist was not as important as Jesus because there were a group of his followers who wanted to give John the Baptist greater importance and place him alongside Jesus, so we are told *He was not himself the light* – no, Jesus alone is the light, John the Baptist came to bear witness (and from the Greek word witness *marturia* we get the English word *martyr* and of course later we know that John is beheaded. The word 'witness' is used significantly in John's gospel to refer to the witness of John the Baptist, the witness of Jesus, the witness of his works, the witness of the scriptures, the witness of those whose lives were changed by Jesus, the witness of the disciples, the witness of the gospel writer himself and the witness of the Holy Spirit.
23. Then John describes Jesus the word entering the world where many did not recognise him – perhaps because they expected the Messiah to be born in a palace and to be a warrior leader who would liberate his people from Roman occupation – but those who did recognise him and believed in him were given the right to become the children of God.
24. By this stage in the Prologue John has introduced some of the main themes in his gospel – about light and darkness, life and death, belief and unbelief, truth and falsehood and then he hits the high note *And the word became flesh and dwelt in a tent amongst us* (as the Greek literally means) *and we have seen his glory, the glory as the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.* For Jews the Hebrew word for glory is *shikannah* – and for them the glory of God was too awesome to behold – not even Moses could look at the glory of God's face, and yet in the birth of Jesus we see the glory of God – a free gift – the gift of grace and truth, the truth that sets us free. John does not record the Transfiguration when God's glory was seen, for John it is seen in the birth of Jesus and in all his actions and especially when he is lifted up on the cross.

25. So the pre-existent Christ who has existed with God before time began, left the perfect world to enter into the mess of everyday life, and to take our human flesh. John's gospel stresses the divine nature of Christ and also his humanity – he is tired, he weeps, he experiences pain.

26. The poet John Betjeman reflects St John's message of the incarnation in his poem *Christmas*. I'll just read two verse of that poem:

*And is it true? And is it true,
This most tremendous tale of all,
Seen in a stain-glass window's hue,
A Baby in an ox's stall?
The Maker of the stars and sea
Became a child on earth for me?*

*No love that in a family dwells,
No carolling in frosty air,
Nor all the steeple-shaking bells
Can with this single truth compare –
That God was Man in Palestine
And lives today in bread and wine.*

27. Christ shared in our humanity so that we might come to share in his divinity and so we are invited into a closer relationship with the word made flesh and we shall do that as we explore the spiritual depths of St John's gospel in the coming weeks.

WEEK 2

THE SPIRITUAL BATTLE

1. One of my Christmas presents was a book called *Our Iceberg is Melting* by John Kotter. The book is a fable about a colony of Emperor penguins in Antarctica. One of them discovers a devastating fact about their colony and its future. They have to change or die, but none of the penguins wants to hear the truth, but the message is clear – change and adapt or die. Although the book is a fable you can recognise the various characters in it who refuse to believe the facts and, of course, the purpose of the fable is to say that the same is true for human beings – we have a choice of responding to the present situation and changing - or of dying. There are, of course all kinds of messages there for us in what is becoming a rapidly changing church, and it is also the message of John's gospel.
2. Last week we looked at the Prologue to John's Gospel in which he says everything has changed – God has come into the world – the Word has become flesh and there is a choice of how you can respond to that great moment in history but ultimately it is a choice between being in the light or preferring darkness, between unbelief or belief so as to become children of God and it is a matter of choosing life rather than death. These are the themes that constantly reoccur in the gospel and the reader is challenged to look into his or her own heart.
3. In Chapter 3 we are told of a Jewish leader called Nicodemus (who was a Pharisee) and he came to Jesus by night – he came in the darkness seeking the light – and Jesus says to him *In truth in very truth I tell you, unless you are born over again you cannot see the kingdom of God*'. I have a soft spot for Nicodemus because he was a humble man. He was a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council and he was a wealthy man because he bought expensive myrrh and aloes to anoint Jesus' body after the crucifixion, so for such to man to come to Jesus is in itself extraordinary.
4. The meeting Nicodemus has with Jesus follows a form that appears elsewhere in the Gospel where conversations take place on two levels – the physical and the spiritual. Jesus says 'you must be born again' and Nicodemus asks how he can go back into the maternity ward and be born all over again, but Jesus is not talking about physical birth but spiritual rebirth.
5. Jesus says you must be born *anōthen* and the Greek word can be translated as 'again' or 'from the beginning' or 'from above', so bible translators have a choice and most opt for 'again' because that is what Nicodemus hears Jesus saying, but Jesus is saying that you must be born from above – from God. Jesus said *In truth I tell you, no-one can enter the kingdom of God without being born from water and spirit*. All baptised Christians are 'born again' because in baptism we receive a spiritual rebirth. The idea of spiritual rebirth would not have been new to either the Jews or Greeks but what was new is that Jesus linked rebirth with the kingdom of heaven - and that was a new idea. The

kingdom of heaven is where God's will is done and we pray in the Lord's Prayer for it to be done on earth.

6. Nicodemus would have known the scriptures and God's promise of renewal in Ezekiel 'I shall give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you' but he wanted to know how this works and Jesus said *The wind blows where it wills you do not know where it has come from or where it is going, so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.* Here there is a play on words in the Greek because the word for wind *pneuma* can mean wind or it can also mean spirit, so Jesus is saying you may not see the spirit but you will feel it at work in your life. I expect all of us can identify times when we have experienced the spirit at work in our own lives.
7. One of the problems with John's gospel is that it is not always possible to tell when he is quoting Jesus and when the author is writing comments of his own – they didn't have punctuation marks in Greek! So when we get to that wonderful verse (3:16) *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that everyone who believes in him should not perish but have eternal life* we are not sure if these are Jesus' own words or John's, but there are many references to Jesus offering eternal life *And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life* but what prevents us from having eternal life is unbelief and preferring darkness and evil to eternal life.
8. Please look at John 3:17-21 and there you will see this spiritual battle between light and darkness, belief and unbelief, good and evil.
9. The theme of water as a symbol of eternal life runs throughout the gospel. John the Baptist appears in the first chapter and Nicodemus is told he must be baptised with water to enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus turns water into wine and he uses water to wash the disciples' feet. And at the end blood and water flow from the body of the crucified Lord. In Chapter 4, again Jesus talks about water – this time to the Samaritan woman at the well. She is astonished because Jews had no dealing with Samaritans and yet they engage in a conversation and like the one with Nicodemus it is at two levels – the physical and the spiritual. Jesus asks for water and she says 'but you have no bucket' and Jesus offers her living water and anyone drinking of that water will never thirst again. She thinks he is offering her a tap in the kitchen but Jesus explains *The water that I shall give is living water springing up into eternal life.* The poor woman is still perplexed so Jesus tells her to go home and call her husband and she has to admit that she has no husband. Then Jesus tells her that she has had 5 and a half husbands and she is astonished and realises that Jesus is no ordinary man and he discloses to her that he is the Messiah.
10. The extraordinary thing about this story is that she was collecting water at about noon and the only reason she would be collecting water in the heat of the day was because she could not collect water when the other women were there. She was an outcast because she had had many husbands, but why had she had so many husbands? Under Jewish law there could only be one reason and that is she was barren, and water is the symbol of fertility.

Water is a symbol of thirsting for God – the Psalmist wrote *Like as the hart desires the water brooks so longs my soul after you, O God*. But it is the waters of Baptism alone and living the life of the baptised that leads to eternal life.

11. We have seen how the birth of Jesus changed everything. The incarnation inaugurated the kingdom of heaven, but it also instigated a battle – a spiritual battle between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of this world. Jesus' ministry was met with great opposition because he challenged many of the long held traditions and beliefs - and the religious establishment liked things as they had always been. And in John's Gospel a group called 'the Jews' are portrayed as leading the opposition to Jesus' ministry.
12. If Jesus had indeed cleansed the Temple on his first visit to Jerusalem as John says (rather than just before his arrest and crucifixion as the other gospels state) then he had made some enemies among the Jews for quite some time, but the opposition by the Jewish authorities is seen in their reaction to his work on the Sabbath. In Chapter 5, we read of the man who had been crippled for 38 years and Jesus met him at the Sheep gate and cured him. Because it was the Sabbath the Jews questioned the man because they considered it against Jewish law to cure someone and then to tell him to work by taking up and carrying his bed. St John writes *It was works of this kind done on the Sabbath that stirred the Jews to persecute Jesus. He defended himself by saying, 'My Father has never yet ceased his work, and I am working too'. This made the Jews still more determined to kill him, because he was not only breaking the Sabbath, but by calling God his own Father, he claimed equality with God. (5:16-18)*.
13. Now there are two things we need to remember. Firstly, when it says the Jews, it was not referring to all the Jews but to a small group of scribes – religious people who studied the scriptures and from them produced thousands of rules by which to live. Secondly, the poor Jewish people were weighed down by these rules and regulations. The scribes said it was wrong to carry anything - even to carry a needle in your robe on the Sabbath, and they even argued if it was permissible to wear false teeth (yes, they did have them) or an artificial leg on the Sabbath. So when Jesus put love and compassion before the minutiae of the law, he clashed with the Jewish religious authorities and things were going to get worse.
14. Please look at Chapter 7 and the opening verses *Afterwards Jesus went about in Galilee. He wished to avoid Judea because the Jews were looking for a chance to kill him*. And then verses 10-13. The impression we get is that Jesus either had to hide away or else appear in a public place because he feared for his life. The temple police were sent to arrest Jesus but they were impressed by what they saw and heard. **Read Chapter 7:45-end.**
15. The Jewish authorities began by thinking that Jesus was just a Sabbath breaker but their charges became more serious and they accused him of the ultimate sin – blasphemy. It is in Chapter 8 that we see a real clash – an argument between Jesus and the Jews when Jesus says to them, 'Your father is the devil' and the Jews respond by telling Jesus that he is possessed. This is a

bitter feud and in John's Gospel the Jews are referred to 70 times compared with just a few times in the other gospels. In Chapters 18 and 19 which tell of the trial of Jesus they are mentioned twenty times.

16. But we also need to remember that Jesus was a Jew and he tells the Samaritan women *salvation is from the Jews* (4:22) and in John's gospel all those who came to believe in Jesus are Jews. Jesus came into conflict with the Jewish authorities of his day and as John shows, this led to his death – and this conflict continued after the death and resurrection of Jesus. There were those who were 'Messianic Jews' who accepted Jesus as the Messiah and those who did not. In AD 85 at the Jewish Council of Yavneh a prayer against heretics who were described as the 'Nazarenes' the followers of Jesus of Nazareth was introduced to synagogue worship, so those Jews who had become Christians broke away and worshipped with the non-Jews who had become Christians. Indeed, it may have been during this painful time that John's gospel was written which is why it can come across as anti-Jewish.
17. Christians need to learn two lessons from this. Firstly, that there is no place for anti-Semitism – Jesus was himself a Jew, and secondly, we need to ask ourselves how often we have preferred not to see the truth. Our iceberg is melting and there are many in the Church in Wales who run away from the truth of what is before them.
18. Now, St John's gospel shows that Jesus was engaged in a spiritual battle and so are his followers. The question that it poses for us is whether we want to walk in the light as children of light (as the baptism service suggests) or whether we prefer the darkness. Do we want to risk the adventure of faith or live in ignorance? Do we want that fullness of life that Jesus offers or do we want to stay in the safety of our comfort zones? Do you remember that Jesus asked the man at the Sheep Gate, *Do you want to be cured?* That may seem an odd question to ask a crippled man but Jesus knew that some people complain but they don't really want to change because that means taking risks. The man was safe with his identity as a crippled man but his life would be radically changed if he was cured.
19. So we are caught up in this spiritual battle. The Desert Fathers saw life itself as a battle field with God and his angels on one side and the Devil and his demons on the other – and some Christian art has depicted this idea, (although we mustn't fall into the trap of dualism which sees the devil as another god) and we all know that it is a struggle to live holy lives but the good news as St John tells us is that we are not on our own - we have the Holy Spirit to assist us in this battle between light and darkness, belief and unbelief, truth and falsehood.
20. In Chapter 14, Jesus tells his followers that he will ask his Father and he will send the Holy Spirit. Now, St John uses a word for the Holy Spirit that is not used elsewhere. Remember I said that the Greek word *pneuma* can mean 'wind or 'spirit' but here St John uses the word *parakletos* and we have a real problem translating it. It literally means 'someone called to be alongside' and when the bible was translated into Latin, they used the word 'Advocatus' – a

lawyer in a court who is called in to speak for someone. Other translators have used 'Helper', 'Counsellor' and 'Comforter'. One American modern translation uses the word 'buddy'! It was Wycliffe who first used the word 'Comforter' but in those days it meant someone who gives us strength which is why the Holy Spirit comforts the disturbed and also disturbs the comfortable!

21. And Jesus tells us that the Paraclete is the Spirit of Truth that will lead us into all truth, will teach us all things and remind us of what Jesus said. **Please look at Chapter 16:5-11.** Now the background to this passage is that Jesus has been comparing those who abide in love with him with those who are in opposition and so he tells us what the Holy Spirit will do. He says it will do three things – it will convict people of sin (RSV convince). Now John was writing many years after the crucifixion by which time some people had realised was a terrible crime it was – they felt convicted of that sin. He then says it will convict (or convince) people of righteousness or justice, that means it will show people that Jesus was not a criminal but the Son of God and thirdly, it will convince people of judgement, that is it will show people that Jesus' death on the cross was the triumph over evil. That is not as easy passage so thank you for bearing with me.
22. Jesus goes on to say *There is still much that I could say to you, but the burden would be too great for you now. However, when he comes, the Spirit of truth will lead you into all truth (16:12).* Christians have always recognised that the Holy Spirit continues to lead us into truth. The Holy Spirit did not stop working when the last book of the Bible was written and so for example, the Christians who fought for the abolition of slavery believed that they were being guided by the Holy Spirit and that is still the task of the Church today – to be attentive to the voice of the Holy Spirit to hear God's truth of how he wants us to be the Church of Jesus Christ in the world today.

WEEK 3

SIGNS NOT MIRACLES

1. I have called this evening 'Signs not Miracles' because John does not use the word 'miracle'. When he describes a miraculous event, he calls it a 'sign'. John tells us in Chapter 20:30 *Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*
2. And after the account of the Wedding at Cana we are told *This is the first sign Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him.* So, people believed in Jesus because of the signs or the miracles as we would call them.
3. The reason that John calls them signs is that they signify something – rather like a road sign points us to take notice of something - signs point to a reality beyond themselves and so we have to dig deep. In St John's gospel, we can read the story at a surface level (as an event) and then we need to look for a deeper meaning that point us towards who Jesus is.
4. In some cases, John describes a sign and then links it to what we call a discourse (you might call it a sermon), that is a long theological essay or even a debate, so for example, Jesus describes the sign that we call 'The Feeding of the Five Thousand' in which people are fed with fish and bread and then he follows it by a debate about the bread of life, and the sign that we call 'the healing of the blind man' in which a man is able to see light again, is followed by a discourse about the 'light of the world'.
5. The signs in St John's gospel are – (1) the changing of water into wine, (2) the healing of the official's son, (3) the healing of the paralysed man, (4) the feeding of the five thousand, (5) the healing of the blind man, (6) the walking on the water (7) the raising of Lazarus and (8) the huge catch of fish. Some scholars try to say that there are seven signs because seven was the perfect number but they omit the walking on the water because they say that doesn't really point to anything. Others exclude the miraculous draft of fishes saying it wasn't really a miracle. Actually, I don't buy the idea that there were seven signs – I think there were eight, but we are not going to be able to look at them all this evening, so we shall just look at three of them and for the sake of convenience I am going to call them 'miracles' even though John doesn't use that word.
6. The first miracle I want to look at will be familiar to you all – the wedding at Cana in Galilee. Some of you may have been on the diocesan pilgrimage with me last year and renewed your own wedding vows in the Church at Cana. Interestingly, they have now found the archaeological remains of another site called Cana and there is an argument as to which is the right one. Anyway, there

was a wedding in Cana and Jesus and his mother were present. The thought is that by this time Joseph was dead. Some sources say that Mary was the sister of the bridegroom's mother and some say that the bridegroom was John himself and that his mother was Salome, the sister of Mary but we simply don't know although it is clear that Mary had something to do with the arrangements and so it may well have been a family wedding. Then disaster struck – they ran out of wine. Now a wedding in Palestine was a huge event – it took place over several days and hospitality was considered a religious duty, so to run out of wine was acutely embarrassing. Mary told Jesus the problem and he said, 'Woman what has it got to do with me? My time has not yet come'. Now if I had said that to my mother I would have got a clip around the ear! But Mary tells the servants to do whatever he tells them and Jesus told them to fill the six stone water jars each holding twenty to thirty gallons and they filled them to the brim. Then he told them to take some out and to take it to the master of the banquet. The master of the banquet tasted the water that had become wine and asked why they had kept the best wine till last when it was normal to serve the best wine first.

7. Now let me just say something about the way Jesus addresses his mother. In first century Palestine, it was considered polite to address a woman as *woman* and Jesus addresses his mother like that at the end of John's gospel when he commends her to the care of John. I suppose it is a bit like we might address someone as 'Madam' today. Now, whilst American young men may address their fathers as *Sir* and their mothers as *M'am* it is not how British youngsters or Palestinian Jewish youngsters would address their parents, so why does Jesus call his mother, *Woman*? The answer is we don't really know. Some scholars say it is because Jesus is trying to distance himself from his earthly family because he believes that water is thicker than blood – in other words the waters of baptism make us brothers and sisters rather than blood ties. Jesus asked *who are my mother and my brothers and my sisters?* And he answered the question by saying *those who hear the word of God and keep it.* Now the translators of the New International Version of the Bible didn't like that explanation so they try to show that the word *Woman* is a term of affection and they translate it as *dear woman* but if I addressed my mother like that I would get a clip around both ears! So I leave you to make up your own minds. In New Testament scholarship this kind of thing is called 'translation theory' – it is about trying to convey the meaning of what is being said rather than the literal translation.
8. Jesus also says *my hour has not yet come.* In John's Gospel, Jesus uses the word *hour* about twenty five times and on two other occasions he says that his hour has not yet come. The importance of that in the gospel is that in John's Gospel Jesus is in charge of events – he is not a victim of circumstances. Jesus decides when his time has come, even his time for the Passion and so he says *The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified* and again we read *Now before the feast of the Passover when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father* and again *When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to*

heaven and said *'Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that your Son may glorify you.* So when you read John's gospel there is always that feeling that Jesus is moving the events, he is not being swept along by them. Now let's get back to the story.

9. The surface reading of the story would tell us that they had a problem – a big problem – when they ran out of wine. If word got around the village of what had happened they would be shamed. They would have failed in their duty of hospitality, or worst still they had tried to put on an event that they couldn't afford and Mary realises the gravity of the situation and turns to Jesus for help. When he says *what has this got to do with you and me?* it is not clear if he is expressing indifference to his mother or the event and scholars suggest that what he is asking is *what is my relationship to this?* In other words 'what is happening here?' Mary tells the servants to trust Jesus and Jesus gets them out of the mess with a nature miracle whereby he turns water into wine. On the surface it sounds like Paul Daniels or one of those TV programmes whereby your house is given a makeover whilst you are away on holiday. An embarrassing situation is not only put right but there was a huge amount of wine –between 120 – 180 gallons of really good wine.
10. I don't suppose that I am alone in using this story at weddings to remind the wedding couple that Jesus is present at their wedding and how he should be welcomed as he was at Cana and how they need to invite him into their marriage.
11. But we need to go deeper. The key to this sign or miracle is that there were six stone water jars. Now remember water is a theme that runs throughout John's gospel – the woman at the well was offered water, and on the cross water and blood flowed from the side of Jesus. But these were no ordinary water jars – they were used for the Jewish rites of purification and significantly there were only six of them and seven was the perfect and holy number. So Jesus makes up for what is lacking in Judaism. Only through the life and death of Jesus are we able to obtain forgiveness and the imperfection of living by law is replaced by the forgiveness that is given through grace.
12. We also need to note the huge amount of good quality wine – it is a sign of God's generosity towards us. The jars were filled to the brim and God's love for us is overflowing.
13. I once asked a friend of mine who is a rabbi what he made of this story and he said (and I don't wish to be indelicate) that for him the significance is that the guests at the wedding (and you and me) are only able to turn wine into water – God alone can turn water into wine. When we make a mess of things God comes to our rescue and puts things right.

14. I now want to look at the raising of Lazarus in Chapter 11. I have a vivid memory of being on a Holy Land pilgrimage when we were taken to the Garden of Gethsemane at the foot of the Mount of Olives very late at night. We were shown the ancient olive trees and the stone inside a church on the site where it is believed that Jesus prayed in anguish. And in the dark and the cold we were asked to imagine how Jesus and the disciples felt after the Last Supper. From the Garden of Gethsemane we looked across the Brook Kidron to the walls of Jerusalem and the lights of the city. Jesus must have heard the noise and jangling of the soldier's armour as they came to arrest him. But just a couple of miles in the other direction was Bethany and his friends Lazarus, Mary and Martha – it would have been easy to go in the other direction to safety.
15. We are told that Lazarus, Mary and Martha were brother and sisters and that they were personal friends of Jesus (Read 11:1-44). The name Lazarus means 'God is my help' and we know a bit about Mary and Martha from Luke's gospel – Mary is the attentive and prayerful one and Martha is the one who needs to keep busy.
16. Firstly, we note that when Jesus is told that Lazarus is ill that he does not go immediately. He chooses his own time and he tells his disciples that Lazarus is asleep. And like Nicodemus and the woman at the well, they take what Jesus is saying literally. Interestingly, the Greek word for sleep gives us the English word 'cemetery' where people sleep in Christ. Jesus talks to them about day and night and of course, light and darkness are significant in John's Gospel – those who walk with Christ are in the light and those who are not with him are in darkness. When Judas leaves the room to betray Jesus we are simply told *And it was night*.
17. And then we are presented with Martha's meeting with Jesus outside the home. There is the 'if only' and the feeling of not being able to accept what has happened. It is Martha characteristically who rushes out to meet Jesus with a sense of reproach and faith – she seems to say 'if only you had been here things would have been different, but even now I know you can do something'. When Jesus says that Lazarus will rise again, Martha seems to say, 'I know that, but I can't wait that long'. Those of us who have tried to comfort the bereaved will know that pious platitudes don't help because they are hurting too much.
18. In the home there is the typical scene of people in grief. Sadly, in recent weeks we have seen scenes on our TVs of people from that region grieving for their loved ones. It was – and perhaps still is – the culture and custom to grieve loudly and they did this at the tomb. The Greek word used to describe Jesus' emotions are difficult to convey in English – they imply that he was shuddering and shaking with emotion – perhaps even with anger which is a human part of grief. We are told that Jesus wept for his friend. He then asked for the stone that was sealing the entrance to the tomb to be moved and Martha pointed out that Lazarus had been dead four days. It was Jewish belief that the spirit of a

- dead person hovered above the body for three days seeking to find a way back, but that on the fourth day it left.
19. Then Jesus shouted three words –Lazarus! Here! Out! (no verb) and Lazarus comes out still bound in the funeral cloths. Then Jesus orders him to be released and the word in Greek *aphete* is the word that is used for forgiving sins.
 20. It is interesting that this miracle does not appear in any of the other gospels. We have accounts of the raising of the dead – Jairus’ daughter and the Widow of Nain’s son – although they were raised shortly after death and some people have suggested that they were in deep comas, but Lazarus was well and truly dead. This miracle is also the only one in John’s gospel where the people are named.
 21. The miracle of the raising of Lazarus appears just before the account that leads to the trial and crucifixion of Jesus and it may be that such a miracle infuriated the Jewish authorities and led to his arrest. In the other gospels, it is the cleansing of the Temple that leads to upsetting the authorities and his subsequent arrest.
 22. The point of the account is to show us the glory of God as Jesus says when talking to Martha. This sign points us to Jesus who himself will undergo death and resurrection and that he is the one who is the resurrection and the life.
 23. And I want to look briefly at the account of the miraculous draft of fishes in the final Chapter of John’s Gospel. But I need to say that Chapter 21 may not have been written by St John. It looks as if the gospel ends with Chapter 20 and that Chapter 21 has been added afterwards to demonstrate the reality of the resurrection appearances at a time when the opponents of Christianity were saying that the resurrection appearances were hallucinations or grief experiences. But no manuscripts appear without Chapter 21 so if it was added by someone else, it was soon after the gospel was written and it is in the style of St John.
 24. The miraculous catch of fish was an event that took place after the resurrection when Jesus appeared on the beach after the disciples had been fishing all night and caught nothing. I said earlier that in John’s gospel Jesus is always in control even throughout his trial and passion, and also in the resurrection appearances. We are told that they had been fishing all night (I think by now you will think, ‘ah! Yes, night equals darkness’) and Jesus appears at daybreak (and you will think, ‘ah yes, daybreak means light’). The disciples had gone back to their old ways - in fact they were so absorbed in their old ways that they didn’t recognise the stranger on the shore.
 25. Jesus shouts at them and addresses them as ‘Lads’ (at least that’s about as accurate a translation as we can find) and then they confirm that they have been fishing all night and caught nothing, so Jesus tells them to cast the net on the

right side of the boat and they caught a huge number of fish. Now those who say this wasn't a miracle say that from the shore you can sometimes see shoals of fish that you can't see when you are on the boat and that Jesus could see the fish and tipped them the wink!

26. But I think it is a sign (if not a miracle) because it points us in a direction. A vision or spirit would not cook a meal and share it or point to a shoal of fish. The resurrection was not a resuscitation (the Church has never believed that).
27. The key to understanding the miracle at Cana was the stone water pots and the key here is that we are told there were 153 fish – an exact number. Now various scholars have come up with some fantastic theories as to how you make up 153 – they are like Carol Vauderman on Countdown, but the simplest explanation which was given by St Jerome is that there were 153 known species of fish, so it symbolised drawing into the Church the whole world. And we are told the net held them and was not broken, so the Church needs to be inclusive and hold people of all kinds. The universal love of God needs to be reflected by the universal love of the Church that finds room for all who follow the light.

WEEK 4

The *I am* sayings

1. I remember taking a French exam at school and I was required to translate into English a story about a man following a donkey. The story ended with the man saying, 'Je suis ce que je suis, mais je ne suis pas, ce que je suis'. Well, every school boy knows that 'je suis' means 'I am' – and so I dutifully translated it as 'I am what I am but I am not what I am' and then the penny dropped and I remembered that *je suis* can also mean 'I follow' so the man behind the donkey was saying 'I am what I am, but I am not what I follow'.
2. Well, in St John's Gospel, Jesus uses the phrase *I am* some thirty five times and you will be familiar with him saying *I am the bread of life ..the light of the world...the door...the Good Shepherd...the resurrection and the life...the way, the truth and the life...the true vine* but he also uses the phrase on other occasions. He uses it when he introduces himself to the Samaritan women and he risks stoning when the Jews ask who he is and he replies *Before Abraham was born, I am*.
3. So what is significant about this phrase *I am*? I always get rather annoyed when I pick up the 'phone and someone says 'Hello, it's me!' and I haven't got a clue who it is, but when Jesus says *I am* it would remind any Jews of the name of God. God revealed himself to Moses in the Book of Exodus as, *I am who I am*. Now some Jewish scholars have identified *I am who I am* with Hebrew letters that give the name Yahweh or Jehovah, but Jews rarely pronounced the name of God because it was considered too holy to utter or to write and so the name of God was described as being ineffable (that is, it not to be uttered) so in some Christian hymns we sing of the 'Great I am' and of God's name being 'ineffable, sublime'. At University, ultra-orthodox Jewish students felt they could not even write the name of God in essays because they considered that to be blasphemous – and not being able to write the word 'God' is quite a problem if you are studying theology - so they wrote God as G- hyphen –D (G-d) as a way of getting around the problem.
4. In John's gospel, Jesus identifies himself with God by using the phrase *I am*. Sometimes Jesus uses it on its own and sometimes it is linked with something else – light, bread, the true vine and so on. Sometimes these saying are linked to the signs or miracles, so for example after the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus says *I am the bread of life* and after the healing of the blind man, he says *I am the light of the world* and after the raising of Lazarus, he says *I am the resurrection and the life* and sometimes he links the saying *I am* with the word *life* or *living*.
5. Now John's gospel is centred around the Jewish feasts and one of the things that John does is to take hold of a Jewish feast and then show how Jesus gives it a deeper meaning, and he does something similar with the *I am* sayings. He takes hold of ordinary things with which people would be familiar like a shepherd, a door, a vine, light and bread – and he gives it a deeper meaning. So let's look at some of the *I am* sayings.

6. Jesus said *I am the bread of life* **Read 6:35-40**. Bread has a symbolic meaning in our society today. It is sometimes used to refer to money or to life itself. There was a TV series of a family in Liverpool called 'Bread', and we know that it is part of our staple diet because it sustains life, so we can see that when Jesus says that he is the Bread of Life, that we recognise that he feeds us, sustains us, and nourishes us. If we want to grow, we need to be fed and Jesus is the one who feeds us spiritually..
7. Now, John's gospel does not explicitly refer to the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist but they are implied. The baptism of Jesus is not recorded nor the command to baptise, but the theme of water runs throughout the gospel –the woman at the well, the marriage at Cana, the healing of the man by the pool, the foot washing and other references to thirst and water. Water symbolises the spiritual life. Similarly, we are not told of the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, nor are we told to 'Do this in remembrance of me' but there are frequent references to bread and wine. The Feeding of the Five thousand is followed by a discourse about eating the flesh and drinking the blood which can only be interpreted eucharistically. The consecrated bread at Holy Communion is sometimes distributed with the words, 'The body of Christ, the bread of life'.
8. There is a lovely Irish blessing that begins 'Be gentle when you touch bread, Let it not lie uncared for, unwanted. So often bread is taken for granted. There is so much beauty in bread, beauty of rain and toil; beauty of sun and soil. The winds of the air caressed it. Christ often blessed it. Be gentle when you touch bread.' Bread has a special meaning for Christians.
9. Bread also had a special meaning for Jews because God fed them in the wilderness and told them that they did not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God (Deut.8:3), so they saw bread as representing God's written word which was the Torah, the Law and the divine wisdom. And Jesus adds *Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me shall never be thirsty*. So Jesus is not just identifying himself with God's word but he is saying in effect that he is superior to the written word because he is the Bread of Life and whoever comes to him will never be hungry. It's a staggering claim and must have shocked his hearers as we can see from verse 41 where the Jews started murmuring. They said 'who does he think he is – we know his mum and dad – now he is telling us he has come from heaven'.
10. Jesus went on to say more about eating and drinking **Read 6:47-58**. Some missionaries have had problems with teaching this passage because taken literally it sounds like cannibalism, but the Jews would have been familiar with the tradition of animal sacrifice. Sometimes the whole animal was offered to the god and it was completely burned, but more often it was offered to the god and then some of it was eaten by the worshippers and they believed that because it had been offered to the god that the power of the god had entered into the flesh of the animal and then into them so that they became god-filled. Here St John seems to be taking hold of an idea that they

understood and then he applies it to Jesus – we have communion with him through bread and wine, his body and his blood.

11. The word ‘companion’ means to share bread. Eating bread with one another is not just something we do in church at the Eucharist and so Christians have regarded eating together as sacred. It is a wonderful custom to say grace at meals – not just when the vicar is present! It is good for families to gather together around the table. I was told recently that many homes today no longer possess a dining room table because families no longer eat together – or if they do, it is on trays in front of a TV. So when we eat or when we fast, we should remember Jesus. There were those wonderful Victorian plaques that people put in their dining rooms that said ‘Jesus is the unseen guest at every meal, who listens in to every conversation’. Sadly, it gave the impression of a judgemental, snoopy God rather than a welcome and joyful guest.
12. Some people have said that St John says very little about the nature of the church – ecclesiology – and that he places less emphasis on it being apostolic than the other gospel writers because he doesn’t emphasise the place of the Twelve in the ministry of Jesus. I think there is some truth in that
13. They also say that John’s gospel can appear to be very individualistic – with individuals rather than communities coming to Jesus. But in fact, that is not the case – the problem we have is with the English language. We no longer use *thee* and *thou* in everyday speech so we cannot distinguish between you-singular and you-plural when Jesus is talking about what applies to a single person or when he means all of us together.
14. In Chapter 10 Jesus uses two *I am* sayings and they are both connected with the world of sheep and shepherds which of course would be a familiar sight in Palestine as in certain parts of Wales. Here in Chapter 10, John uses the you-plural that is he means everyone. He says *I am the door of the sheepfold* and a little later *I am the Good Shepherd*. Here we need to understand something about Palestinian shepherding. Shepherds might work alone but they would often work together in groups which is why if one sheep got lost a single shepherd could go off in search of it and leave the other ninety-nine to be looked after by other shepherds. Otherwise the shepherd might find the lost sheep and lose the other ninety-nine! During the day the shepherd would lead the sheep – he walked in front and they followed him. In Europe, shepherds tend to walk behind their sheep. The shepherd would lead the sheep to new pastures and protect them from harm.
15. I remember being in Bethlehem many years ago and seeing the shepherds in the early morning cooking their breakfasts with all the flocks of sheep mixed up together. Then as the shepherds began to walk away in different directions they made sounds that their sheep recognised and the sheep began to follow their shepherd and I recalled the words from St John’s gospel, *I know my own sheep; and my sheep know me*.

16. At night the shepherds would take the sheep to an enclosure. It might be a large enclosure which would accommodate many flocks – it would have high walls and a door which would be bolted from inside, or it might be a smaller enclosure for a single flock with an opening but no door and the shepherd himself would lie across the door, so when Jesus said *I am the door (gate)* he was saying that he protects his people from danger. In a large sheepfold people might climb over the walls to steal sheep but when there was a single flock and just one shepherd, he alone had to protect them.
17. The image of God as the shepherd and the people as the sheep would have been familiar to the Jews *The Lord is my shepherd (Ps23) Give ear O Shepherd of Israel. We are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand. He will feed his flock like a shepherd and will gather the lambs in his arms.* And the leaders of Israel were described as the shepherds of the people and nation. The prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel had some harsh things to say about leaders who lead their people astray *Woe to the shepherds of Israel that do feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the sheep? (Ez 34).* So perhaps we should not be too surprised that Jesus calls himself a shepherd and not just a shepherd but the Good Shepherd not like the ones denounced by the prophets.
18. Jesus also passes on this role of shepherding and at the end of John's gospel we read of Peter being told by Jesus to *feed my lambs, feed my sheep.* It is also not too surprising that a bishop carries a shepherd's crook – but only when he is among his own people – he doesn't carry it outside his diocese.
19. But to get the full picture we need to know a bit more about Palestinian shepherds. In the West most sheep are kept for breeding lambs that will be killed when they are a few months old. In Palestine, the sheep were mainly kept for wool and so the same sheep were with the same shepherd for years and they knew one another well. A Palestinian shepherd carried a *scrip*, a bag in which he carried his food, a *sling* which he would use to throw stones to frighten off predators and to make a wandering sheep return (no sheep dogs), a *staff* which is like a wooden club to defend himself and his sheep, and a *rod* which is what we call a shepherd's crook. He used this as a walking stick and he also used to make the sheep pass under it as they entered the sheepfold so that he could examine them individually to make sure that they were not sick or injured.
20. We can also delve a little deeper. When Jesus said *I am the door* he is describing himself as the one who protects his people, but he is also the door to the Father *No one comes to the Father except through me.* He says that through him we can come in and go out and the Christian faith is about that inward journey to God and that outward journey to the world. I know one priest who finishes services by saying 'Now you have been to church, go out and be the Church'.
21. When Jesus contrasts himself with the bad shepherds, he sees the bad as hirelings who run away when the wolf comes, but the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. In Greek there are two words for good –

agathos meaning morally good as we might describe someone who is upright, honourable and a person of integrity, but there is also the word *kalos* which means beautiful as well as good, and this is the word Jesus uses for the Good Shepherd. When someone tells me they have a good priest I know they are meaning *kalos* not just a priest who sings well, chairs meetings efficiently and takes services nicely, but someone with deeper qualities of love and sacrifice who like the Good Shepherd are prepared to give their lives for their people. In the Church in Wales ordination service for a priest, candidates are told, 'Remember with thanksgiving that this ministry now to be entrusted to you is a sharing in the ministry of him who died on the cross. It will require sacrifice and bring suffering, but lived faithfully, it will also bring you joy and peace'.

22. St John develops the passage about the Good Shepherd by referring to the mission of the church *I have other sheep which are not of this fold. These too must hear my voice and there will be one flock and one shepherd.* He is referring to the Gentiles. God's love is for all – it is not exclusive - and this upset some of the Jews, and it upsets some Christians today who feel that God only loves people like them. We are told that there was a split among the Jews – some said he is possessed and others asked how that could be because a possessed man would not be curing the blind.
23. This led to a showdown on the Feast of Dedication or Hanukkah. As Harvest Festival is a newly established feast for Christians, so Hanukkah was a new feast for the Jews and it celebrated the rededication of the Temple after it had been desecrated in 167 BC. The feast lasted eight days and was celebrated by putting eight lights in your window (so it is commonly called the Festival of Lights).
24. I said earlier that many of the incidents in John's gospel take place around Jewish feasts and Jesus gives them a deeper meaning. **(Read 10:22-30).** Here we see the irony of the situation. Jesus is here in the winter darkness for the Festival of Lights – he who is the true light of the world. The Feast reflected on the bad shepherds who had desecrated the temple and the good shepherds who had restored it - and here is the Good Shepherd in their midst. The event takes place in the temple but here is Jesus who will replace the temple. Jesus reminds the Jews that his own sheep listen to his voice and they shall receive his protection because they have been given to him by the Father and he says *My father and I are one.*
25. So the *I am* saying which imply divinity are made even more explicit when Jesus claims that he and the Father are one, and this is met with increasing hostility. Jesus defends his position and we are told *This provoked them to one more attempt to seize him. But he escaped from their clutches.*
26. We can see the way it is going. The ministry and activity of Jesus was meeting with greater opposition from the religious authorities, but he escapes from them because the time for his Passion had not yet come. Jesus himself will decide when that should be, and we shall look at that next week.

WEEK 5

THE PASSION

1. I want to start by telling you not about John, but about Joan – Joan Williams. Joan was a parishioner of mine when I was a parish priest. She was a striking character with a Yorkshire accent, a no-nonsense approach to life and bright purple hair! The choir boys referred to her as the ‘purple headed mountain’ and I can never sing *All things bright and beautiful* without thinking of Joan. Joan was a bundle of energy and spent all her life in works of charity and in caring for others. One day she said to me, ‘I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I don’t seem to have any energy and it’s so unlike me’. I encouraged her to talk to her doctor and she was diagnosed with cancer of the liver.
2. As soon as she knew she was dying, Joan taught her husband how to cook and manage the household. She prepared herself to meet God and constantly assured her visitors that she was not unhappy about dying. I took her Holy Communion each week, anointed her, heard her confession and we talked about saying farewell to family and friends and how to prepare to meet God. Joan wrote letters for people to have after she died and in her final week she asked to see various people to thank them and to say ‘goodbye’. Late one evening, she ‘phoned me and asked to see me and I went to her bedside. She was full of thanksgiving for her wonderful life and the 70 years that God had given her. She thanked me for my ministry to her and asked for the Last Rites and during the night she departed this life.
3. I could tell you a lot more about how Joan died because she was such a remarkable woman and it was such a remarkable death – she died as she had lived. And that is the message that St John gives to us about the death of Jesus. He prepares others for what is to happen. He prepares himself for his return to the Father and he died as he lived.
4. In John’s gospel there is a gradual build up to the Passion. We see the increase in opposition from the religious leaders and with each chapter we hear the teaching unfold as to who Jesus is. With each of the *I am* sayings he identifies himself more and more with God and that reaches a climax in Chapter 10 when Jesus says *The Father and I are one*. This so angered the Jewish authorities that he had to flee. In the following Chapter (11) we have the account of the raising of Lazarus which is a foreshadowing of Jesus’ own death and resurrection but for the Jewish authorities it was the final straw and they had a discussion about what they were going to do. **Read 11:47-53.**
5. Chapters 11-20 - that is nearly half the gospel - involves the build up to the Passion and the Passion itself and I can’t take you through ten chapters in one evening in any detail but I can give you a broad overview and point out some of the important features in John’s account.
6. In Chapter 12, Jesus visits his old friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus and Mary anoints Jesus with costly perfume of pure nard and she puts it on his head

(which was the normal place) but she also put it on his feet which would normally only be done when preparing a corpse for burial. She then untied her hair to wipe his feet and a Jewish woman would normally only untie her hair when in private with her husband or when in mourning, so here again we have the foreshadowing of the death of Jesus.

7. The second part of Chapter 12 tells us that it is the Feast of Passover and the historian Josephus said that over 2 million people used to travel to Jerusalem for Passover. We are told that word had got around that Jesus would turn up – and the authorities were looking for him. Then when he did turn up the crowd went crazy and welcomed him as a king by tearing down palm leaves.
8. One of the themes in John's account of the Passion is irony. The high priest for one year sentences the high priest for all time. The high priest says that one man must die for the people, and on Palm Sunday, Jesus is welcomed as a king on a donkey and so we sing, 'Ride on, ride on in majesty, in lowly pomp ride on to die'.
9. Chapter 12 sees the arrival of the Greeks in Jerusalem for the feast – they were Gentiles and somehow their arrival signals that Jesus' time had come. Three times before we are told that 'the hour had not yet come' but now Jesus recognises that this is the right time and he says, *The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified*. You will remember that one of the characteristics of John's gospel is that Jesus always takes the initiative. He is not going to hide away – now is the time for glory and that too is a characteristic of John's gospel. But 'glory' does not mean human triumph like someone winning a gold medal, it means facing sacrificial death
10. The latter part of Chapter 12 and Chapters 12-17 contain what are called the Farewell Discourses as Jesus gives urgent teaching to his disciples because he knew that he was leaving them. There is of course, the question as to how these were all recorded. Did someone sit down and write it all down? Well, tape recorders, shorthand and notebooks were not around so that seems unlikely. It is much more likely that the author John has reflected on the teachings of Jesus and brought them together in a narrative form – and again we hear the Johannine themes about light and darkness, belief and unbelief, life and death.
11. I also have another theory. We are told in John's Gospel that after the crucifixion the beloved disciple took Mary, the mother of Jesus, into his home and looked after her. The gospel tells us no more of Mary although there was a tradition recorded by some of the early Fathers that the risen Christ had appeared privately to his mother. But if John was a young disciple and took care of Mary, he may have gained much of his information from her.
12. Chapter 13 begins with the foot washing when Jesus took off his garments, put a towel around his waist and began to wash the disciples' feet. This account does not appear in the other gospels but it links with John's emphasis on water. The foot-washing was normally carried out by a servant not by the host but Jesus washes the feet of the Twelve – including John, Peter and Judas

– to show that he is the servant of all. Peter refuses to have his feet washed but Jesus says, *Unless you are washed you can have no part in me.* There is the link with the earlier teaching of Jesus when he says *No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit.* Baptism is our entry into our life in Christ.

13. After the feet-washing, Jesus tells them, *You ought to wash one another's feet. I have set you an example, you ought to do what I have done to you.* This is a new commandment and the Latin for 'commandment' is *mandatum* which gives us the English word 'Maundy'. In some churches there is the liturgical washing of feet as the bishop or priests wash the feet of twelve members of the congregation, but the liturgical act is to remind us all of the need to serve one another in love and humility.
14. Chapter 13 ends with the account of Jesus revealing to the beloved disciple (possibly John himself) who is to betray him. And Jesus says to Judas *Whatever you have to do, do it quickly'* and there are those haunting words *As soon as Judas had received the bread he went out. And it was night.* He had exchanged the warmth and light for the cold and dark.
15. The Chapter concludes with another betrayal as Jesus warns Peter that he will deny him.
16. Chapter 14 is full of assurances for those whom Jesus is leaving. He says *Trust in God, trust also in me. In my Father's house are many resting places; if it were not so I would have told you. I am going to prepare a place for you.* Then with another *I am* saying he shows that he is the only way to the Father. *I am the way, I am the truth and I am the life; no one comes to the Father except by me* and then he promises to send them the Paraclete – the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth who will teach them everything. And then Jesus says *Peace is my parting gift to you, such as the world cannot give. Set your troubled hearts at rest and banish your fears.*
17. Chapter 15 begins with the final *I am* saying. *I am the true vine.* John is very fond of the adjective *true* or *real*. After the feeding of the five thousand, his flesh is called *true* food and his blood *true* drink and he is called the *true* light and the *true* bread from heaven. In the Old Testament, Israel is compared with a vine (indeed, the vine not the star of David, had become the symbol of the nation of Israel) and the prophets described Israel as a fruitless vine, so John describes Jesus as being the *true* vine as opposed to the fruitless vine, and he gives us a beautiful image of himself as the vine with ourselves as the branches. The branches are attached to the vine from which they gain water and nutrients to be able to produce grapes, but if branches are not doing that and not producing fruit they are simply sapping away the energy from the rest of the vine and preventing healthy branches from flourishing and they need to be cut off. Some Christians can be like that – they do not seek spiritual nourishment through word and sacrament – they are not serious disciples of Jesus and they can distract the church from its real task of mission.

18. In John 15, there is much about abiding in Christ. Branches can only survive if they are part of the vine and Christians can only survive and grow if they are close to Jesus, so Jesus says *abide in me as I abide in you*. The word *abide* *meno* is linked with the word used to describe the 'resting places' in the Father's house – it is about making our home in Christ. In the New Testament, the word 'Church' is never used to refer to a building, it is always used to describe the people who are in a living relationship with Christ – so the Church is compared to a bride with Christ as the bridegroom, or as a human body made up of many parts but all necessary for a healthy body – here Jesus likens the Church to a living vine that can produce much fruit or no fruit at all. It is an image that you might wish to take back to your own church. You may need to ask what you do as a church that produces no fruit and consider some pruning and also to recognise what produces fruit and do it better or more often.
19. Knowing that he is soon to leave them Jesus gives them more teaching – he tells them to abide in him and to abide in love. He says *As the Father has loved me so I have loved you, abide in my love....This is my commandment love one another as I have loved you...There is no greater love than to lay down your life for another ...I no longer call you servants but friends... you did not choose me, I chose you.*
20. In the early Church, Christians were known for their love of one another. As new Christians prepared for baptism they were told to go and worship with the local church and to see how those Christians love one another. I sometimes wonder how much love we have for one another in our own congregations – although sometimes I am pleasantly surprised!
21. Jesus tells us that he wants us to be his friends *I no longer call you servants but friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you* and he goes on to say that he has shared all he knows with us just like a friend. He has not treated us as servants but friends (**Read 15:14-17**). There is of course nothing wrong in being a servant but a servant can be too busy serving his master rather than finding time to be with him. There is a real danger in many of our churches of people being so busy to keep things going that they don't have enough time simply to sit and be quiet and abide in the love of Jesus.
22. In Chapter 16, Jesus again talks about leaving the disciples and you can sense the feeling of bereavement in the words. Jesus said *I did not tell you this at first, because then I was with you; but now I am going away to him who sent me. None of you asks 'Where are you going? Yet you are plunged into grief because of what I have told you. Nevertheless, I tell you the truth; it is for your good that I am leaving you'* He warns them that they will face suffering and persecution but that he will send the Holy Spirit. The Chapter begins and ends with a warning of the suffering that is to come but the Chapter ends with the words *In the world you will have tribulation, but take courage. The victory is mine. I have conquered the world.*
23. Chapter 17 is an important Chapter and it would be possible to do a whole Lenten series on this chapter alone – it is often called the High Priestly

Prayer and instead of it being addressed to the disciples, the whole chapter is a prayer to the Father. The prayer is centred around three petitions. Firstly, Jesus prays for himself *Father, glorify your Son*. Then he prays for the disciples, *Father, protect them in your name* and then he prays for the Church *Father, may they be with me*.

24. In Chapter 18 the action begins. John includes detail that does not appear in the other gospels – he says they went to a garden across the Kidron valley. There would have been a full Passover moon but the soldiers came with lanterns and torches to arrest the light of the world. In John the first wound of the passion is not a kiss – instead Jesus steps forward and takes the initiative. He asks the soldiers who they want and when they tell him, he replies *I am* (the Greek is *I am* not *I am he*). Only John mentions that it was Peter who drew his sword and cut off the ear of the High Priest's servant and only John gives us his name, Malchus which suggests that he may have been an eye witness.
25. Jesus is taken to the house of Annas, who was a former High Priest and the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the present High Priest. Peter is questioned about his association with Jesus but denies him three times and the cock crows so it must have been daybreak.
26. From Caiaphas, Jesus is taken to Pilate and questioned. Now in the other Gospels Jesus remains silent and calm when questioned but not in John's Gospel. In John's Gospel, Jesus appears almost to be in charge of his own trial and he answers the accusations quite robustly and defends himself.
27. John describes the Roman trial in seven scenes and it is clear that the trial is about power and kingship – it is not about what Jesus has done but who he is. There is Pilate inside the building questioning Jesus 'Are you King of the Jews?' and there is the crowd outside demanding his death and John portrays Pilate as running in and out like a scolded cat as he attempts to resolve matters and keep public order. Pilate wanted to release Jesus but he had to appease the mob, and so he had him dressed as a king in a crown of thorns and a purple robe, but that misfired. Then the crowd accused Pilate of not being Caesar's friend and that was a serious accusation to make against Roman governor. Pilate's strategies of offering Jesus or Barabbas had failed; the mocking and flogging had failed, so Pilate handed Jesus over to be crucified. The irony here is that Roman justice was a source of great pride and yet here Pilate hands over a man whom he believes to be innocent to be crucified – the Roman form of capital punishment for a thief.
28. In John's gospel, Jesus carries his own cross – Simon of Cyrene does not appear in John's account nor do we hear of the conversations with the two who were also being crucified – Jesus is still in control and is crucified beneath the words, 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews'.
29. The evangelists quote different words uttered by Jesus from the cross. Mark and Matthew have cries of desolation and Luke has words of trust and

forgiveness, but John (as we might expect) has three sayings and each one shows that Jesus is in control.

30. Jesus sees his mother and the 'disciple whom he loved' and said, '*Woman behold your son*, and to the disciple, '*Behold your mother*'. At one level Jesus is making a practical arrangement for those he is leaving behind; at a deeper level he is bequeathing us to one another for the waters of baptism make us family.
31. Then, having being stripped naked and in the full heat of the day, and after hanging on the cross for so long, his body was drained and Jesus said, '*I thirst*'. Again this can be seen as a purely physical need, but because thirst and water are themes in the gospel, it can also be seen as Jesus' longing to be with his Father.
32. Then finally there were the words *It is finished*. For John, Jesus decides when it is over and he is going to die. And we are told he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.
33. In John's Gospel the crucifixion takes place on the Day of Preparation for the Passover when the lambs were being slaughtered for the feast, so the true Lamb of God dies once and for all whereas the Jews will continue to slaughter their lambs year after year. But those involved in the crucifixion needed to get home for the feast. They could not leave the men to die so they broke their legs to speed up the process, but Jesus was already dead, and when they pierced his side water and blood poured out – again this is may be a purely physical description or at a deeper level they may be seen as symbols of baptism and eucharist.
34. Then John does something interesting. He inserts a personal note and writes *This is vouched for by an eye witness, whose evidence is to be trusted. He knows that he speaks the truth, so that you too may believe*. Mary, the mother of Jesus and the 'disciple whom Jesus loved' were at the foot of the cross, so if John the evangelist is indeed John, the beloved disciple, we have an eye witness account.
35. John then describes the burial of Jesus and Nicodemus (who had come to Jesus by night) appears on the scene again – he brought the spices to prepare the body for burial. Then we move to Chapter 20 which describes Mary Magdalene coming to the tomb *while it was still dark* and she discovers that the stone sealing the tomb has been rolled away, so she ran and got Simon Peter and the beloved disciple and they went into the tomb and only saw the linen cloths lying there and they went home. Mary stayed and saw two angels who asked her why she was weeping and then she turned around and saw the Risen Lord but thought he was the gardener. But of course she was not mistaken because he was the gardener, the new Adam and she was the new Eve walking in the garden in the cool of the day. The resurrection of Jesus had changed the world, and she was told to go and proclaim that message – and we must do the same.

36. The remainder of the gospel tells of the resurrection appearances. Jesus appears and commissions the apostles with authority to forgive sins. There is the account of doubting Thomas, and the miraculous catch of fishes – 153 of them probably representing the known species of fish and symbolising the mission of the Church to gather in everyone. Then Peter who had denied his Lord is asked three times *Do you truly love me* and he is given pastoral charge.
37. The Gospel ends with the wonderful words *There is much else that Jesus did. If it were all to be recorded in detail, I suppose the whole world could not hold the books that would be written.*
38. And like John I feel that sense of inadequacy in not having been able to do justice to the Gospel, but I hope it will have encouraged you to read the Fourth Gospel in a new way, and above all to let it feed your hearts and minds and to deepen your understanding of Jesus, the way, the truth and the life.