

ABIDING WITH AND IN JESUS¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Second Sunday after Epiphany, 19 January 2020

Are you familiar with the acronym “WYSIWYG”? It’s a term in computing: “What you see is what you get”.² It refers to software that allows the user to edit a document in the form in which it will finally emerge. It’s largely out of date now because the most frequently used programs are of that type. Earlier programs required much more action by the user to produce a document’s final form.

I expect that many of us apply the WYSIWYG principle to our reading of the gospels. We imagine that what we read is what we are to get. If so, we are seriously mistaken and this morning’s gospel is a good example.³

The gospel reading is in two parts. The first, which runs from verse 29 to verse 34, has John the Baptist pointing out Jesus to his disciples. This event follows immediately after the account of the priests and Levites coming from Jerusalem to question John about his identity and role. They ask, “Who are you?” and offer several possible answers, all of which John denies, particularly that he was the Messiah. On the very next day, Jesus appears and John identifies him.

Jesus and John the Baptist are cousins and their families are known to each other, so we should not imagine that the truth suddenly struck John when Jesus came by. This means that the gospels sit on a substructure that they don’t easily reveal to us. We need only to think about the availability of the donkey on Palm Sunday or the organisation of the upper room for the Last Supper. Both these events suggest that Jesus was running an organisation. He was not just a transient preacher who wandered from place to place. He was creating his own environment, not just responding to the actions of others.

Having recognised Jesus, John goes on to say that he is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. We hear those words very often. They appear in every Eucharist. What do they mean? At this point, we need to step back and reconsider the interchange between John and the emissaries from Jerusalem. Why were they concerned about John? Most likely because he could possibly upset the political stand off between the Jewish authorities and their Roman occupiers. John was a potential political threat. Thus, they started their questioning by asking him directly whether or not he was the Messiah, which he denied.

Their next questions were a fall-back from Messiah. Was John Elijah or another prophet? You may remember that Elijah was taken up into heaven by a fiery chariot.⁴ Popular belief thought that Elijah was, therefore, still alive and would return to herald the Messiah. Similar traditions had another prophet-herald. So, these questions were about whether John was the herald of the

¹ Readings: Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 40:1-14; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WYSIWYG>

³ In this sermon, I rely on Brendan Byrne, *Life Abounding: A Reading of John’s Gospel*, Strathfield, St Paul’s Publications, 2014; Richard Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology*, Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2015; Michael Fallon, *The Gospel According to St John: An Introductory Commentary*, Kensington, Chevalier Press, 2005; Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (eds), *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011.

⁴ 2 Kings 2:1-12

Messiah. John denied these specific roles but did acknowledge that he was a herald, the one crying out in the wilderness.

The authorities then attack John for baptising without any specific role or mandate to do so. This is when John begins to mention the one who is to come. After this, our gospel reading begins.

In this context, John deflects attention from a Messiah with a political agenda to one with a spiritual agenda. Jesus, as Messiah, was not, in John's view, to overthrow the existing political order, but to change the relationship between humans, "the world", and God. It is important here to note that the Lamb of God was to take away "the sin", not the sins of the world. Why is this important? One of the meanings of the Greek word used is "misrecognition", or "missing the mark". We have misrecognised something and that is our place in the scheme of things.

The story of the Garden of Eden suggests that our fundamental sin is the desire to be, and the perception that we are, 'like God', that is, the centre of things. This is the meaning of the suggestion that the characters in the story could know good and evil. It is demonstrated by the fact that they discovered that they were naked, that they were separate from each other. What is significant in the one who takes away 'sin' in this sense is that, while actually being the centre of the universe, he behaves as though he were not. This is contrary to us, who, not being the centre of the universe, behave as though we are. In this sense, John was referring to our fundamental relationship with God, not our more ordinary daily transgressions, however important or trivial they may be.

When we think about the Lamb of God, our first thought might be the kind of offerings that the priests made daily in the temple in Jerusalem.⁵ But these offerings were not principally for the expiation of sins. Rather, they were to express thanks, gratitude, and love to God. Neither were they exclusively the sacrificing of lambs. They could be bulls, goats, doves, grain, wine or incense, often depending on the person's wealth.

There are two more preferable references. The first is to the Paschal Lamb, the one slain for the Passover. This lamb was, however, not for the forgiveness of sins. It was a memorial of the lamb whose blood was daubed on the Hebrew doorposts to save them from the final disaster in Egypt before the Exodus. This reference might suggest that God will "passover" our sin.

The final possibility is the lamb used on the occasion when Abraham did not sacrifice his son, Isaac.⁶ This sacrifice is not presented as being for sins either. The critical thing in this story is that God provides the lamb. This is where we can make the link with John's statement about Jesus. The point is that the lamb is still supplied by God but with a difference.

We need to be clear what this gospel is saying about Jesus. "This is the Lamb of God: not the lamb of the human community given to God, but the Lamb of God given to the ... human community."⁷ This is not God providing a lamb that we can sacrifice because God demands it, as in the case of Abraham and Isaac. Jesus does not take away our sins by allowing us to offer him as some form of sacrifice to an angry God. God offers Jesus as God's sacrifice for us. God absorbs our sin, undermines its basic assumption, and thereby takes it away.

⁵ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Korban>

⁶ Genesis 22:1-19

⁷ Gil Bailie, http://girardianlectionary.net/year_a/epiphany2a.htm

The second part of today's gospel has two of John's disciples defecting to follow Jesus. I assume that they were persuaded by John's words. We don't know what John thought about that but it is certain that not all his followers did the same as Andrew and the other unnamed person. John the Baptist still has followers in the Mandeans.⁸

What you see is what you get is specifically not the case in the interchange that takes place between these two defectors or new recruits, however you might regard them. In response to Jesus asking what they are looking for, they simply ask him where he is staying. This question has hidden depths as the gospel writer well knew. The disciples are asking simply the surface of the question. Jesus does not answer them directly. If the surface question was all that there was, Jesus could have said that he was staying with some named person or in this or that village. Jesus, however, does not take this question as a simple request for information. Instead he tells them to come and see. When they come and see they remain with Jesus that afternoon but, as we know, they actually remained with him for the rest of his ministry.

This brings us to a deeper meaning of the word, "staying". It can mean also "remain" or "abide". The Johannine literature has two other places where this wider meaning is displayed. In a later part of the gospel, John has Jesus saying:

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.⁹

Jesus goes on to say that abiding in him means sharing in the Father's love. In the first letter of John the gift of the Spirit is said to be evidence that we are abiding in him.¹⁰

That's why WYSIWYG is not the best way to read the gospels. There is always something else to be discovered, a deeper meaning to be revealed when we persist in our search. This morning's gospel is a prime example. Its deeper message is well expressed in Kevin Hart's poem "The Gift".

The Gift

One day the gift arrives—outside your door,
Left on a windowsill, inside the mailbox,
Or in the hallway, far too large to lift.

Your postman shrugs his shoulders, the police
Consult a statute, and the cat miaows,
No name, no signature, no address,

Only, 'To you, my dearest one, my all ...'
One day it fits snugly in your pocket,
Then fills the backyard like afternoon in Spring.

Monday morning, and it's there at work—
Already ahead of you, or left behind
Amongst the papers, files and photographs;

⁸ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mandaicisms>

⁹ John 15:4-11

¹⁰ 1 John 4:13

And were there lipstick smudges down the side
Or have they just appeared? What a headache!
And worse, people have begun to talk:

‘You lucky thing!’ they say, or roll their eyes.
Nights find you combing the directory
(A glass of straw-coloured wine upon the desk)

Still hoping to chance upon a forgotten name.
Yet mornings see you happier than before—
After all, the gift has set you up for life.

Impossible to tell, now, what was given
And what was not: slivers of rain on the window,
Those gold-tooled Oeuvres of Diderot on the shelf,

The strawberry dreaming in a champagne flute—
Were they part of the gift or something else?
Or is the gift still coming, on its way?¹¹

¹¹ Kevin Hart, ‘The Gift’, in Kevin Hart (ed.), *The Oxford Book of Australian Religious Verse*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1994 p. 92

