

Great St Mary's Cambridge: Sermon: 4 Feb 24 (2 before Lent)

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Proverbs 8.1,22-31 The Gifts of Wisdom

Does not wisdom call,
and does not understanding raise her voice?
The LORD created me at the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts of long ago.
Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.
When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.
Before the mountains had been shaped,
before the hills, I was brought forth—
when he had not yet made earth and fields,
or the world's first bits of soil.
When he established the heavens, I was there,
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
when he made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains of the deep,
when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his command,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
then I was beside him, like a master worker;
and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,
rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the human race.

John 1.1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

In the beginning was the WORD, and the WORD was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.

As a priest, accompanying others who want to grow in their spiritual life, I have found a good starting place is to invite them to spend some time with the question 'who is God for you.' I give them a sheet of paper with three boxes: the first box heading is *God as God was presented to me or taught to me when I was a child*. The second heading is 'God as I have come to know God through my 'searching, learning and experience'. The third heading is 'God as I would like to know God, God as I would like to relate to God'. It is a very rewarding exercise to do and copies of this sermon are available in the back of church and it will be available on the website.

We all, each one of us, carry an idea or image of God in our minds and in our hearts, and, whether we are aware of this or not, it is central to how we live our faith and lives. In my experience, for most people who do this exercise, it is a real revelation, as we are usually not conscious of our image of God. Becoming more aware of it opens up exciting possibilities for our faith journey, our growth and our relationship with God.

We have just come out of the Christmas season, and so, we may be surprised to hear the prologue from John's gospel again, which is a Christmas Day gospel reading.

This morning it is paired with a passage from the book of Proverbs, which draws our attention to 'the beginning': the beginning of creation and the universe, the beginning of the Bible in the book of Genesis, the beginning, with wisdom and understanding there from the start.

We are enticed to focus on the opening verses in John's gospel and ask the question 'what is the significance of the way he chooses to open his gospel'?

The first thing to notice is that his gospel opens with the same words as the first book in the bible, the Book of Genesis. John takes us right to the start of the creation of the world.

He then chooses 'the WORD' to introduce Jesus – 'the WORD' which, in Greek, is 'Ho Logos'. John's contemporaries, Christian, Jew, Gentile, on hearing 'Ho Logos' would immediately have had a wealth of associations which are lost in translation. For us to appreciate what John is saying, we need to be aware that 'the WORD' *ho logos* is not just about words – though this is one of its meanings. There is much more to it. John takes us into a depth of meaning and mystery AND, at the same time, he introduces a God, who wants to be known and therefore wants to communicate with us.

Any of us who think we have a clear idea of God, who God is, are reminded that God is beyond our imagination, infinite, yet, inviting us into relationship, inviting us to seek with our whole strength and being: heart, mind and spirit. It is the task of a lifetime with lady wisdom and understanding by our side.

I am indebted to David Ford's very good theological commentary¹ on the Gospel of John for an overview of the three main meanings of 'ho logos'/ the WORD.

First, John uses WORD *logos* because writing is made-up of words, and he is trying to communicate the most important meaning and truth he knows, which he traces to God. At the centre of his conception of God is **the relationship** of Jesus to his Father, which we see especially in verses 14 and also 18. It is a relationship of mutual indwelling; they are utterly inseparable, yet they can be distinguished from each other. WORD, *logos* captures this combination of God's communication, identification of Father and Son, their intimacy and also their differentiation. In the rest of his gospel John fills out what this WORD means, mostly in the form of story. We learn about Jesus through the way he acts (think: wedding at Cana, healings, foot washing, death and resurrection) and the way he is.

The second reason for the use 'logos' is about the way it connects us with the whole of scripture. John's Greek speaking contemporaries would have used the Greek translation of the Old Testament, which is known as Septuagint. It opens with the same Greek words 'en arche' (in the beginning) as John's gospel. The word 'logos' appears numerous times in the Septuagint, to describe ordinary human speech, to

¹ David Ford, The Gospel of John, Baker Academy, Lambeth Edition, 2022, p.30

depict God speaking, to refer to wisdom, to describe various parts of the Old testament; it is in the name for the 10 commandments 'deka logoi'.

So John's gospel resonates with the whole bible and shows that the words narrating the good news of Jesus Christ cannot be separated from the person of Jesus, who is 'the WORD', the *logos*.

The third important reason for the use of *logos* is that 'logos' was part of the Greek speaking world beyond religious use, having the ordinary meaning of speaking words, but also referring to human reasoning. It also was a technical term, used in philosophical discourse by Platonists, Stoics and Neo Platonists. So, by using 'logos' WORD, at the beginning of his gospel, John is bringing together his scriptures, but also reaching the civilization in which he lived.

This third reason, Jesus, the '*logos*', associated with thought and rationality became very important in the Early Church and for the spread of Christianity. Some of the most influential early Church Fathers, for example, Origen, came from a philosophy background and were able to make theological sense of the God of the Bible and Jesus as 'Logos' and therefore, to embrace Christianity and spread the good news.

We see that John's inspiration to use '*Ho Logos*' as a name, a concept for God and for Jesus, allows for the different ways we human beings come to know of God and gain understanding through our seeking, learning and experience. And what is communicated is this deep truth of mutual relationship within God and with us; the good news is about mutual indwelling and deep loving.

I hope I have opened for us a renewed desire for seeking God with all our heart and mind and strength, especially as we close to Lent.

I want to close with some wonderful words by the theologian Martin Hengel. He summarises the significance of WORD in these words: How simple and how extraordinary a symbol, yet how complex and how inclusive! As a stimulus to the imagination, it was able to fuse together aspects of human experience that normally tend to fly apart: hearing and doing, thinking and feeling, remembering and hoping, the liturgical and the ethical, the doctrinal and the mystical, the inaudible and the audible, the eternal and the historical. Amen

Martin Hengel the prologue of John, p. 289, quoted in David Ford page 30.