

In our Parish Reading Project during Lent, we're reading the Gospel According to John. John can be a complex Gospel. On the one hand, it often flies to soaring heights. It is often glorious in its proclamation of who Jesus is and what he has done.

On the other hand, John is rather different from the other 3 Gospels. And at times, that can cause us some difficulty in understanding it.

Case in point is found in our Parish Readings in John this week, contrasted with our Gospel lesson today from Matthew.

Today, we just heard Matthew tell us about Jesus' temptations. This story appears in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Mark, the earliest Gospel, starts by talking about John the Baptist. Then Mark moves on to Jesus' Baptism. And then Mark says Jesus goes out in the wilderness for 40 days to be tempted by Satan. And then Jesus calls some disciples and begins his ministry.

Matthew and Luke tell much the same story, though they add something to Mark. Both Matthew and Luke tell about Jesus' birth, and a few episodes from Jesus' childhood. And then, they move on to talk about John the Baptist, and then Jesus' Baptism, and then Jesus going into the wilderness for 40 days to be tempted by Satan. And then Jesus calls some disciples and begins his ministry.

So there is considerable overlap in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Yes, there are some differences too. But Matthew, Mark, and Luke share a similar storyline, a similar outline, a similar skeleton.

Thus for centuries the term "Synoptic" has been used for these three Gospels. "Optic"—the term for seeing. "Syn—"—the prefix which means together, or with. Synoptic means that Matthew, Mark, and Luke can be "seen together," they have similar viewpoints. Yes there are important differences, but there are more similarities than there are differences.

But then there's the 4<sup>th</sup> Gospel. Then there's John. For the past 1,900 years, Christians have realized that John is different.

We have to look no further than the way John begins. This week in our Parish Reading Project we've been reading through the first 2 chapters of John.

First, John starts with a very philosophical sounding prologue: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and lived among us."<sup>1</sup> I'll come back to that in a few moments.

Then, like in the synoptics, we're introduced to John the Baptist who talks about why he baptizes. And then, the next day, John the Baptist sees Jesus coming toward him and says a couple of things about Jesus.

First: "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jn 1:1, 14

<sup>2</sup> Jn 1:29

Second: John the Baptist testifies that "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him (on Jesus)."<sup>3</sup> But the Gospel of John never says that Jesus was baptized. John the Baptist saw the Spirit coming upon Jesus like a dove. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, there is a similar occurrence at Jesus' baptism. But the Gospel of John never explicitly says Jesus was baptized, just that John the Baptist saw this vision of the Spirit.

And then, the next day, John the Baptist points out Jesus to a couple of his disciples, and they begin following Jesus. And one of them is Andrew, who later brings his brother Simon Peter to meet Jesus. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, when Jesus is beginning his ministry, he meets these particular disciples while they're fishing on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus calls Simon Peter and Andrew to leave behind their nets and follow.

But this is a different encounter, before Jesus begins his ministry. And it takes place at the southern end of the Jordan River, not by the Sea of Galilee which is a solid two days journey to the north. Then John ends chapter 1 with two additional disciples being called.

Chapter 2 begins with a scene not found in the Synoptic Gospels. Jesus and his mother and his 5 new disciples are at a wedding party in the little town of Cana, which is near Nazareth in Galilee. The wine for the party runs out. But Jesus turns 6 stone jars of water into wine, and the party keeps going.

And then in chapter 2, Jesus goes to Jerusalem for the first of 3 Passovers mentioned in John. And there he overturns the tables and scatters the coins of the money changers. And he drives out the animals they're selling. This sounds very similar to what Jesus does in Matthew, Mark and Luke.

But there's a major difference. In the Synoptics, Jesus does this during the last week of his life, toward the very end of his ministry, just a few days before his Crucifixion.

In John, Jesus does this at the beginning of his ministry, at least two years before his Crucifixion.

So already, in just the first 2 chapters of John, we see many of the complexities of John.

First off, we have things that are just the same. John the Baptist is baptizing people in all 4 Gospels.

But we also have things that are a little different. John the Baptist mentions seeing the Holy Spirit come upon Jesus. But Jesus' baptism isn't mentioned.

And we have the calling of several disciples. But it's in a different location in John versus the synoptics. And it's just days after Jesus' baptism, not months.

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<sup>3</sup> Jn 1:32

And we have Jesus driving out the moneychangers in all 4 Gospels. But in John it happens significantly earlier, years earlier in Jesus ministry.

And then we have the wedding in Cana, which is absolutely unique to John.

So that's what makes John's Gospel so complex. Some things are almost exactly the same as in the Synoptics. Some things are similar yet different. And some things are absolutely unique.

So how do we deal with these complexities? One thing I would strongly urge you NOT to do is to over-simplify these complexities to make them easier to deal with. This has been tried over the centuries. And most of these attempts turn into caricatures.

Remember, when someone is drawing a caricature, certain features of the subject are exaggerated for comic effect. And so parts of a caricature share relationship with the person being drawn. But a caricature is not an accurate portrait of a subject.

Here are some classic caricatures of the Gospel of John.

One ancient caricature is that Matthew, Mark, and Luke are interested in Jesus' earthly ministry. But John is interested in the spiritual or philosophical meaning of who Jesus is. There is some truth in this. John is concerned with spiritual meanings. But John is also concerned with Jesus' earthly ministry. John spends a lot of time showing Jesus engaged in detailed and long conversations with individuals. Jesus is not just some wandering philosopher or guru. He also is a pastor, a shepherd. And there are deep character studies of the people Jesus is interacting with and ministering to.

Another related ancient caricature is that John is more reflective than narrative. John is more interested in reflecting on who Jesus is, rather than on telling the story of what Jesus does. Again, there is some partial truth to this. But John reflects on who Jesus is, AND also reflects on the events and actions of Jesus' life in this world. John very clearly calls Jesus the word made flesh. That means that what he does in the world matters greatly.

Another ancient caricature is that John is all about symbolism. And yes, John does use symbolism frequently. But symbolic meanings don't negate underlying meanings, more concrete meanings. When Judas leaves the Last Supper to betray Jesus, John says "it was night."<sup>4</sup>

John is undoubtedly wanting us to see the symbolism that it is a spiritually dark time when Jesus is being betrayed. But John also wants us to know, that yes, it was nighttime as well.

In fact, over and over again in John, just when you think things might be getting too symbolic or too philosophical, John will often drop some little concrete asides into his narrative. They're almost subliminal. But they reflect eye-witness testimony.

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<sup>4</sup> Jn 13:30

John is not some purely allegorical, symbolic work. John instead is telling the story of Jesus based on the eye-witness testimony of the disciple who stands behind the Gospel of John. More than any of the other Gospels, John just keeps dropping these little historical tidbits into his narrative. They don't really mean much by themselves. They are simply little reminders that there is eye-witness testimony undergirding John.

We get them over and over again. There are about 60 of these asides in John, as opposed to about 15 in Mark and 6 in Luke.

Just little details: This happened near the Bethany that's on the other side of the Jordan.<sup>5</sup>

That happened in the Bethany that's near Jerusalem.<sup>6</sup>

This particular building had 5 porches.<sup>7</sup>

When Jesus said all of that, it was at the Capernaum synagogue.<sup>8</sup>

This event took place about 4:00 in the afternoon.<sup>9</sup>

That event took place about noon.<sup>10</sup>

And on and on they go.

All together, these asides add up to reflect testimony of someone who was intimately familiar with the details of what Palestine was like in the early part of the first century. Yes, the Gospel of John may be deeply philosophical and have a lot of symbolism. But it also has this concrete eyewitness testimony.

So, what's the short version of who this eyewitness is? We don't know for sure. He's referred to as the "beloved disciple," or "the disciple whom Jesus loved." He may be John, the son of Zebedee. I think later evidence points somewhat strongly in that direction. Or he may be some anonymous disciple.

He probably ended up in Ephesus in what we would call southwest Turkey after Jerusalem was destroyed. And he probably lived there until his death in the 90's AD. And he shared his testimony with the church he was part of. And after his death, they edited his written testimony and spoke about him in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person.

Thus we get this statement that appears to come directly from him about him witnessing Jesus dying on the cross:

"He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Jn 1:28

<sup>6</sup> Jn 11:18

<sup>7</sup> Jn 5:2

<sup>8</sup> Jn 6:59

<sup>9</sup> Jn 1:39

<sup>10</sup> Jn 19:14

<sup>11</sup> Jn 19:35

And we get this third-person statement about this disciple when Jesus is talking to this disciple after the Resurrection:

"This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true."

Which brings us to another statement. It's actually the purpose statement of the entire Gospel. And it can give us a handle on dealing with some of the complexities of John. And it can give us a handle on dealing with some of the ways John differs from the other Gospels.

Here is the way the Gospel of John sums up why it was written:

"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."<sup>12</sup>

The Gospel of John acknowledges that there are other things Jesus did that are not written down in John. Maybe it's referring to some of the things recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. But John is written with this clear purpose: So that you may believe in Jesus, and that through believing you might have life.

Which brings us back to the prologue of John. It would take a full sermon to go through the prologue in detail. I have preached such sermons before during Christmas time, and I can get you a copy of such sermons if you ask me.

But the prologue of John basically functions like the overture of an opera or a musical. In an overture the orchestra plays small snippets of various songs you hear later in the work.

John's prologue is the same. It briefly mentions the themes that will come up again later in the Gospel.

The prologue mentions "glory" which will appear 15x in the Gospel. It mentions "light" which appears 16x. It mentions "truth" and "love" which will appear 21x each. It mentions "life" which will appear 39x. But above all it mentions "believing" which appears 85 times in our English translations and a whopping 98x in the original Greek.

Believing is the central theme. These things are written so that you may believe.

That's what John wants for you. That's what John wants for me.

During this season of Lent, as we read through John together, that is my prayer for each of you:

May you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and by believing may you have life in his name.

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<sup>12</sup> Jn 20:30-31