

LEADERS' RESOURCE

WE HAVE FOUND THE **ONE**

ANGLICAN CHURCH NOOSA
Extract from New Bible Commentary on the Gospel of John
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LENT 1 February 26 - The calling of the first disciples

John 1:35-51

The repeated *Lamb of God* statement (35) is intended to imply that the two disciples who followed Jesus had caught something of the significance of the one to whom John had pointed. There is nothing in the narrative to suggest that John the Baptist expected any of his disciples to desert him; rather the implication is that he saw this as part of his own mission in heralding Jesus. The name of only one of the disciples is given, and the other may have been the author John. The idea of *following* in v 37 is no doubt neutral and only later became a fuller commitment to discipleship. Their response to the question of Jesus and their addressing him as *Rabbi* shows their serious intentions in following him. The title 'Rabbi' was one of respect and did not refer (as it came to do later) to one who had been trained in the rabbinical schools. It may be wondered why in v 39 *the tenth hour* is mentioned. If John was using the normal Jewish method of reckoning, the hour would have been late afternoon and a stay until the end of the day is implied.

The way Andrew is said to have found his brother Simon Peter as *the first thing* he did suggests that he had grasped at once the great significance of the encounter with Jesus. John gives two other flashes of insight into the character of Andrew in this gospel (*cf.* 6:8; 12:22). The term *Messiah* (40) is translated by John for the benefit of his non-Jewish readers. Both the Hebrew *Messiah* and the Greek *Christ* are derived from a root meaning 'Anointed One'. Although in the OT the idea of anointing was mainly in the setting apart of kings, in the NT the concept is applied to Jesus in a widened sense to include the idea of an anointed prophet, priest and king. A contradiction has been supposed between this announcement and the synoptic records, which suggest that Jesus was not recognized as Messiah until Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi. But there is no need to suppose that here the disciples had anything but a very general idea of what Messiahship really meant. In v 42 there is a marked emphasis on personal relationships involving Andrew, Simon and Jesus. Again there is a difference between John and the synoptics in the time at which the name Peter was given to Simon. Here it is given at the beginning of the ministry, whereas in Mt. 16:18 it is confirmed after Peter's confession. It is worth noting that Jesus here uses the future tense which would point to the Mt. 16:18 occasion. Both Peter and Cephas mean 'rock', suggesting that Jesus was thinking of the rocklike character which he proposed to make of Simon.

So far at least three disciples are said to have followed Jesus. But John mentions two others before commencing his account of the ministry of Jesus in ch. 2. In the case of Philip Jesus took the initiative in telling him to follow. Philip is mentioned again several times in this gospel (6:5; 12:21; 14:8). He appears to have been a man with a practical frame of mind. Although Philip, Andrew and Peter are said to be from Bethsaida they had come to live in Capernaum (Mk. 1:21, 29). A further piece of personal witness which led another to Jesus is mentioned here when Philip contacted Nathanael. Since the theme of witness is so important in the gospel, the method by which Peter and Nathanael were brought to Jesus is significant.

Personal testimony has always been one of the most fruitful means of leading people to become disciples of Jesus. There is a difference in the way Philip introduced Jesus compared with Andrew for he did not point to 'the Messiah', but to *the one whom Moses and the prophets wrote about*. It is the same thing. The reference to Jesus of Nazareth sparked off a sceptical remark by Nathanael (46). Evidently Nazareth had something of an unsavoury reputation, and the way it rejected Jesus (Lk. 4:14-30) is in line with that reputation.

The encounter between Jesus and Nathanael is most instructive. First, we note the high opinion that Jesus expressed of him (47). The thought of *an Israelite in whom there is nothing false* may have been prompted by the story of Jacob, who is clearly in mind in v 51. Secondly, we note his inquiring mind—*How do you know me?* There is here an element of surprise which suggests that Nathanael had not previously met Jesus. Thirdly, we note the foreknowledge of Jesus, which must have greatly impressed Nathanael. There is no certain way of knowing what Nathanael was doing under the fig-tree, but the main point here is the more than ordinary insight of Jesus, which was clearly recognized by Nathanael. His response was far-reaching. Not only did he recognize Jesus as *Rabbi*, but also as *Son of God* and *King of Israel*. Again, even at this early stage, there was an understanding of Jesus as Son of God, however rudimentary. John has brought out the initial references to the divine Sonship of Jesus in the prologue to the very core of the emerging ministry of Jesus. The *greater things* of v 50 are explained by v 51, which speaks of the development of spiritual vision. The idea of seeing angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man seems to be an echo from the story of Jacob (Gn. 28:12). The meaning of the statement is that heaven is now opened for continuous communication with people, the representative of whom is Christ himself under the title *Son of Man*. It is remarkable that this title is substituted for Nathanael's *Son of God*, for this shows that the human aspect of Jesus is as important as the divine.

LENT 2 March 5 - Nicodemus

John 3:1-21

The importance of the interview between Jesus and Nicodemus is increased because the latter was a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin. Such a man would have been well acquainted with Jewish teaching and would have understood the allusions that Jesus made. Although John often mentions Pharisees slightlying, here he concentrates on a Pharisee with a serious purpose in seeking Jesus. It is not certain why he came to Jesus *at night*. It may have been to avoid publicity. On the other hand, the comment may be an incidental note of time without further significance or it may be symbolical, relating to Nicodemus's spiritual state. The first is the simplest explanation. Nicodemus's opening words in v 2 connect with the comment in 2:23-25. Here was a man who had seen the signs and was ready to ask further questions. However it is clear that Nicodemus's view of Jesus did not go further than seeing him as a teacher with the stamp of God upon him. At least that was a start, but far short of a full understanding. Jesus' comment in v 3 goes beyond Nicodemus's implied question. The necessity of the new birth challenged Nicodemus's right to make an assessment of Jesus on a purely human level. The words *unless he is born again* could be

understood in the sense of being born from above, or of drawing attention to the birth's spiritual character. Nicodemus clearly understood them in the first sense and rejected the possibility of a second birth. But Jesus meant them in the second sense, *i.e.* a totally different kind of birth. Many of the early fathers understood the statement to refer to baptism in the light of v 5, but the most natural understanding is of spiritual regeneration.

The kingdom of God is an expression found more in the synoptics than in John. It relates primarily to the sovereignty which God exercises. Here 'seeing the kingdom' seems to be equivalent to the more familiar expression in John of eternal life. It is called 'entering the kingdom' in v 5.

Nicodemus's question in v 4 is surprising since it took Jesus' words so literally. Nicodemus's rejection of the idea of entering the womb a second time reflects his confusion. He could not grasp that the kingdom required an act of regeneration. There was an element of incredulity about his comment. The repetition of the need for rebirth in v 5 is strengthened by the contrast between *water* birth and *Spirit* birth. There has been much discussion over the meaning of this verse. Some take the reference to water to point to baptism and think Nicodemus would have understood it as an allusion to the baptism of repentance practised by John the Baptist. But there is no hint of this in the passage. Others have supposed a reference to Christian baptism, in which case there was no possibility of Nicodemus understanding it and John must have imposed the idea on the story for his own contemporaries when writing. If, however, the words of Jesus made any sense to Nicodemus we must take water and spirit together and relate this to one birth as in v 3. OT usage would infuse water and spirit with the meaning that God would act for the cleansing of his people (see *e.g.* Ezk. 36:25-27). In this case, Nicodemus was being told that some spiritual experience of regeneration was needed for a proper appreciation of the kingdom of God. There is dispute over whether spirit should have a capital 'S' (as in the NIV) or whether it should primarily be understood to point to a spiritual experience as contrasted with ritual cleansing. As far as Nicodemus was concerned the latter is most probable, but in the light of further references to the Spirit in this gospel John possibly intended his readers to understand the Holy Spirit. Indeed in v 6 the contrast between *flesh* and *Spirit* makes better sense if the Holy Spirit is in mind. *Flesh* is here pointing to human nature, which can reproduce only humankind not the children of God. Being born of the spirit requires a radical change, a new beginning. The gist of Jesus' statement is that the character of those born is determined by the source that gives them birth.

It is a pity that 'born-again' has been debased in common speech; as a scornful description of an extreme sect or even referring to old ideas renewed or new versions of motor cars! It would be very unfortunate to allow ridicule to deprive us of a concept so vital and central to the Christian faith.

V 7 stresses the imperative character of the new birth. There is nothing optional about it. The illustration of the *wind* (8) becomes more intelligible when it is realized that in Greek the same word can be translated wind or spirit. What Jesus was saying here was that although there is lack of knowledge about the origins of both wind and Spirit, the effects of both are observable. Our knowledge of wind movements has vastly increased in modern times, but in those times the wind was unpredictable. What comes over is the sovereign operation of the Spirit of God. It ties up with the statement in 1:13.

Clearly, Jesus expected a man like Nicodemus to understand his illustration, and he was rebuked for not doing so. His question was tinged with incredulity, and this was recognized by Jesus (as v 11 shows). Nicodemus had still failed to grasp the significance of what Jesus was saying. The *we* (11) in Jesus' answer has been variously interpreted. Was Jesus including the disciples? At this stage they knew very little. Was he including the Father and the Spirit? This is possible, although it

is doubtful whether Nicodemus would have recognized this. Or was he echoing the *we* used by [p. 1031] Nicodemus in v 2? It is clear that the *we* is contrasted with *you people*, which seems to refer to the Jews generally who failed to believe in the message of Jesus.

The *earthly things* in v 12 must refer to what had already been said and, therefore, must include the new birth. This takes place on earth, whereas the *heavenly things* relates to revelations of the future when the kingdom would reach its fulfilment. V 13 probably refers to the state from which Jesus descended and to which he returned at the ascension. Because heaven was his home he was in a position to speak authoritatively of heavenly things. At first there does not appear to be any clear connection between v 14 and the previous verse. Moses lifting up *the snake in the desert* was a well-known symbol of God's provision of life for his people, but a more profound connection is the symbolism of the lifting up on the cross, the focus of the work of the Son of Man on earth. The words *must be lifted up* show the unavoidable nature of the cross if eternal life is to be shared with believers, a point strongly brought out in v 15.

Generally in this gospel the author distinguishes between Jesus' words and his own, but in this case he has omitted to do so. Vs 31-36 are apparently a comment of John. The statement in v 16 concisely expresses three truths—the universal character of God's love, its sacrificial nature and its eternal purpose. It is no wonder it has been described as 'the gospel in a nutshell'. Since the verb used (*have*) is in the present tense this shows that eternal life is intended to be a present possession. This statement would have been challenging for Jewish hearers who were used to thinking of God as loving only Israel, but it is in line with the idea of universal love found elsewhere in the NT. The word *world* is used with the usual meaning in this gospel of a place in need of God's saving grace. This explains why Jesus came to save, not to condemn (17). The fact is that the world was already in a state of condemnation, although this became accentuated by the lack of faith in God's Son. V 18 makes clear that Jesus as God's Son is the ultimate touchstone which divides the world into two groups, believers and unbelievers. The reference here to faith in God's Son links up with the statement of the author's purpose in writing the gospel in 20:30-31.

Vs 19-21 contain an echo from the prologue (1:5) in the contrast between *light* and *darkness*. Those in darkness are there *because their deeds were evil*. This implies a deliberate decision to do acts which in God's sight were evil. This explains why such people hate the light, because it means that the true nature of their deeds will be seen (20). There is a strong contrast with those who live by the light, described here as living *by the truth*. Their purpose is entirely different, for they want their actions to be plainly seen so that God's work in them may be evident. V 21 can be understood in two ways: either as expressing the content of what is seen; or the reason why anyone comes to the light. The former is better in the context. The purpose of this section is to encourage faith in Jesus.

LENT 3 March 12 – Woman at the Well

John 4:4-42

There were two possible routes from Judea to Galilee. The longer was through Gentile country on the east side of the Jordan; the shorter was through Samaria and was most used in spite of the animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans. V 4 suggests this latter route was chosen of necessity. Perhaps John is implying that there was divine reason as far as Jesus was concerned. It is generally supposed that *Sychar* is the modern Askar, near to the ancient Shechem. There still exists a deep well, which according to tradition is the original well. That Jacob was of special significance to the Samaritans is seen from v 12. Jesus was tired (6); this seems an intentional note to stress the true humanity of Jesus and also provides a setting for the opening of the conversation. The *sixth hour* would be noon, the hottest part of the day.

It was unusual for a woman to visit the well alone. She may have been considered something of a social outcast. John adds a note that the disciples were absent (8) to highlight the dialogue between the woman and Jesus. Jesus' action overcame two Jewish prejudices—conversation with a Samaritan and conversation with a woman. The racial prejudice is heightened by the woman's remark (9). Jesus must have anticipated her perplexity for he used it to deepen the conversation. The idea of *drink* for physical needs led naturally into the comment about *the gift of God* (10), which turned it into a spiritual issue. The woman was thinking of Jesus as a typical Jew, but Jesus took her up on this. If she had known his identity she would have asked for *living water*. This expression had a double meaning, either running water, *i.e.* spring water, or spiritual water, *i.e.* connected with the Spirit. The Rabbis thought of the Torah as living water, which shows its metaphorical use. It is, however, not surprising that as yet the woman thought only on the human level, as v 11 shows. It seemed foolish to her to think of water from a deep well without any means of drawing it. Her vision stretched no further than a bucket. Comparison with Jacob, who dug the well, suggests to her that Jesus was inferior. On two counts, therefore, she made an erroneous judgment. She could not conceive that anyone could be greater than the venerated Jacob (*cf.* the similar inability of the Jews to conceive anyone greater than Abraham; 8:53). The real superiority of Jesus was in the *living* quality of the water provided. Jacob's well could only temporarily quench the thirst (13). There are many OT passages which link God's promises with the water illustration (*cf.* Is 12:3; Ezk. 36:25-27). The connection between water and the Spirit is also an OT idea (*cf.* Is 44:3). The reference to *eternal life* (14) is clearly connected with the activity of the Spirit, as is seen from 6:63.

There are similarities between this narrative and the Nicodemus incident, in that in both accounts misunderstandings lead to further explanations. The woman in v 15 was still thinking on literal lines. She imagined a constant water supply would eliminate her visits to the well. She had not yet grasped the spiritual dimension. There is more significance than seems apparent in Jesus' answer to the woman (16). There was, in fact, a moral blockage. She had not grasped the nature of her own need. The woman was forced to face reality in admitting she had *no husband*, although she hid the fact that she was living with a man. Jesus was displaying that greater insight which John had noted in 2:25, and which the woman herself began to recognize (19). Jewish teaching disapproved of a woman having had more than three husbands, and the idea of a common-law husband had no religious support. The woman was therefore in great moral and spiritual need. We note the gentle way in which Jesus both commended her and yet criticized her (17-18).

When she acknowledged that Jesus was *a prophet* (19), she probably thought of an inspired person. This is at least some advance on her earlier view of him. Although the woman's introduction of the issue of the place of worship may seem a diversion to avoid an unpleasant subject, it is more likely that her realizing that Jesus was some kind of Jewish prophet prompted her to show her acquaintance with Jewish–Samaritan differences over the main place of worship (20). Worship was closely linked to a sacred place. In the past there had been a temple built on Mt Gerizim to rival the temple at Jerusalem. Even after the Gerizim temple was destroyed by John Hyrcanus, the Samaritans continued worshipping on the mountain. It is not clear how concerned the woman was about these differences, but she seized on it as a matter worthy of discussion. Jesus used her reply to make a profound statement that transcended the argument about location. Jesus first turned the discussion away from the place to the object of worship (22). Although neither Jerusalem nor Mt Gerizim were relevant in this matter, the Jews were nevertheless superior in their understanding of God. Since the Samaritans were restricted to the Pentateuch, they lacked the theological richness of the revelation of God in the rest of the OT. When Jesus says *salvation is from the Jews* (22) he is not saying all Jews will be saved, but that through the Jews came the knowledge of that salvation in the Scriptures. Since the neuter *what* is used in both cases, this draws attention more to the essence of worship than to the person worshipped. The reference to *a time is coming* (23), modified by *has now come*, shows clearly that it is the ministry of Jesus which would radically transform worship. The mode of worship is now to be *in spirit and truth*, which transcends all racial and local considerations.

The main emphasis here is on spirit as v 24 shows. *God is spirit* may be compared to 'God is light' and 'God is love'. These are ways in which he can be known. The spirituality of God was not an idea alien to the Jews, but they had not recognized the need for any correspondence between the one worshipped and the worshippers. Jesus taught that the worshippers must share something of the nature of the person worshipped. The linking of *spirit* and *truth* here points to the necessity of genuine worship. God desires worshippers who are in tune with him (23). All this probably left the woman somewhat out of her depth. She sensed some Messianic connections, although it is not clear what she meant by *Messiah* (25). The Samaritans did not use the word, as far as we know. The woman may have used it because she was talking to a Jew. Certainly the Samaritans were looking for the Prophet (Dt. 18:15-19) who would reveal the truth, and this throws light on the woman's words. It gave Jesus the cue to declare himself as the expected Messiah. He was prepared to do this to a Samaritan but not to the Jews whose Messianic hopes did not fit in with Jesus' mission.

4:27-38 The disciples rejoin Jesus. As a result of the disciples' return from their errand to buy food, the woman departed to the town (28). John comments on the disciples' surprise that Jesus was talking with a woman, which reflects the general Jewish prejudice (27). Jewish rabbis were not permitted to speak to women in the street and considered any conversation with women to be a hindrance to the study of the Torah. The reluctance of the disciples to ask questions show how embarrassed they were over Jesus' actions. The woman, on the other hand, seems to have lost her inhibitions in her haste to tell others about Jesus. Her grasp was limited and tentative. *Could this be the Christ?* (29) suggests she had not fully accepted Jesus' declaration in v 26, for it could be understood in the sense 'Surely this cannot be the Christ?' Yet she did arouse considerable interest, particularly because of Jesus' penetrating insight into her past.

Vs 31-34 preserve a classic case of misunderstanding of spiritual truth by those who can think only in literal terms. The disciples were concerned with material food, but Jesus turned the conversation to spiritual account. Their conclusion was that someone else must have provided food if Jesus was not interested in eating (33). The gist of Jesus' reply in v 34 is that doing God's

will takes precedence over physical food. But these words cannot mean that Jesus was advocating a neglect of physical food. Rather Jesus was here, as so often in John's gospel, concentrating on this main task, *i.e.* finishing the work the Father had sent him to do. The harvest illustration is intended to link immediately with the fulfilment of the mission (34-35). But what is the point of the reference to *four months*? It is possible that in alluding to the natural harvest, still four months away, Jesus intended a contrast with the spiritual harvest which was immediate. When he urged the disciples to *look*, he may have been thinking of the citizens making their way towards him as a result of the seed sown in the mind of the woman. The spiritual harvest is concerned with *eternal life*, a favourite theme in John's gospel (36). Although no gap is implied in v 35, in vs 36-37 a distinction is introduced between sowing and reaping. In the spiritual harvest the gap between the sowing and reaping is indeterminate (*cf.* the metaphor used in Am. 9:13). The principle involved is summed up in v 38. What the disciples had already reaped was due to the work of others before them. No single individual can claim credit for the success of any spiritual mission. The harvest belongs to the sower as much as to the reaper. It is possible that the *others* refer to the long line of prophets who had prepared the way, of whom John the Baptist was the last.

The conclusion to Jesus' mission in Samaria is seen in a specific example of spiritual harvesting. This took place in two stages. Many believed because of what the woman had said, but more believed through the testimony of Jesus himself. We must assume that the faith of the former was necessarily limited by the experience of the woman. Her testimony concerned the remarkable insight of Jesus, but personal contact with Jesus himself must have deepened their faith, hence the force of v 42. The fact that the Samaritans wanted Jesus to stay with them was extraordinary since he was a Jew, but showed their awakening conviction that he was a *Saviour*, not simply of the Jews but of *the world*. It is impossible to know what content to put to this concept. It would have fallen short of later Christian reflection on salvation, but Jesus had presumably shared with them something of the saving purposes of his mission. The full title used here occurs again in the NT only in 1 Jn. 4:14. It was, however, used in the contemporary world of various gods including Zeus and even of the Roman emperor Hadrian. But John understood the term here in its inter-racial sense.

LENT 4 March 19 – The Blind Man

John 9:1-41

There is a clear connection between this chapter and ch. 8, because both in 8:12 and 9:5 Jesus declared himself to be the light of the world. John now gives a specific instance in which Jesus was seen as light, giving sight to a blind man. The other gospels record instances of Jesus healing blind people, but in John what is characteristic is the discussion the healing provoked which centred on the person of Jesus himself.

It is not clear from the text when this incident happened, but it was some time between the Feast of Tabernacles and the Feast of Dedication (*cf.* 10:22). The man had never seen (1). The fact that he was born in this condition heightened the theological discussion which followed. There is less

difficulty in seeing some connection between sin and suffering as a general principle than in applying it to particular cases (2). The disciples' assumption that either the man himself or his parents must have been at fault was in line with contemporary theories. Some of the rabbis taught that it was possible to sin before birth. But Jesus refused to answer the question, *who sinned?* and chose rather to focus attention on God's glory. That suffering could be used for God's glory was a concept difficult to believe, although it is inherent in the Christian approach to the problem. It can show the illuminating power of Christ, not only in the physical but also in the spiritual sphere. In v 4 Jesus was including his disciples in the working out of his own mission, although they were not involved in the immediate miracle of healing. The contrast between *day* and *night* appears to be symbolic, if the reference is to the mission of Jesus, in which case the *night* would represent the close of that mission. The increasing hostility and unbelief of the Jews might be represented by the darkness of night, but the former view seems preferable.

Jesus' remark in v 5 shows that he was thinking of his earthly life. The use of *saliva* in curing blindness finds some parallels in Mk. 7:33; 8:23, although in these cases the saliva was applied direct, whereas here it is mixed with soil. There was a current belief that saliva was beneficial for diseased eye. But whereas Jesus used currently understood means, he did not attach any superstitious value to them. In fact the healing happened only when the man washed in *the pool of Siloam* as instructed by Jesus. It is not clear why John gives the interpretation of the name Siloam as *Sent*, but perhaps he sees some connection with Jesus as the sent one. It may, of course, be no more than a help for Greek readers, as in other instances with Hebrew names (*cf.* 1:42). V 7 implies some delay in the healing, perhaps to test the man's faith. The subsequent account of the conversation between the man and his neighbours is told with exceptional vividness (8-12). The argument about the man's identity, the vagueness of his own knowledge of Jesus and the certainty of the cure are all clearly brought out.

9:13-34 The Pharisees' view of the healing. It is not clear in v 13 who brought the man to the Pharisees. It may have been the neighbours of v 8 or others who were hostile to Jesus. John's comment about it being the *Sabbath* on which the healing took place supplies the clue to the action. The objectors were obviously those who were sticklers for the Jewish law. The making of clay on the Sabbath would have been enough to raise their hackles, in spite of its being done in an act of mercy. The Pharisees' interest in the method of healing (15) was no doubt because they saw some opportunity to criticize Jesus over it. But in fact the Pharisees show a similar division of opinion as the neighbours (16). The dispute in their case was between the strict legalists, whose main concern was the Sabbath regulations, and others, who were so impressed with the signs that they could not imagine a sinner performing them and therefore were concluding that the legalists were judging wrongly. The blind man's statement that Jesus was a *prophet* (17) was an advance on v 11 when he referred to *the man they call Jesus*.

The next section (18-23) demonstrates the sheer obstinacy of unbelief. The Jews disbelieved the man's own words and would not accept that he had been born blind. The demand that the man's parents should be required to substantiate his testimony does not appear to have been made from an impartial desire to sift the evidence. Their prejudice against the idea that a man born blind could receive his sight is apparent. Only the parents could confirm that the man had been born blind, but they themselves were hardly in a position to supply an explanation of the miracle. The narrative brings out that their response was inhibited by [\[p. 1045\]](#) their fear of the Pharisees. Threat of excommunication was a powerful weapon. At the same time it was justifiable for the parents to pass the question back to the son. There is some debate over v 22 since some scholars think it improbable that during the lifetime of Jesus the synagogue would have introduced a ban about Jesus being called the Christ. But it would have been quite natural for reports to circulate

claiming that Jesus was the looked-for Messiah, although it was much later that the full truth of this dawned on the Christians.

The words of v 24, *Give glory to God*, cannot mean that Jesus' opponents were urging the man to praise God for the healing. It was a common Jewish oath which called on the man to speak the truth. The Jews were convinced that Jesus was a sinner because he broke the Sabbath. The man's own knowledge of Jesus was based on personal experience (25). He had no comment to make on the technical matter, but was very firm in acknowledging his restored sight. The opponents were baffled by the fact of the healing and switched to the method used (26). Facts can be stubborn, but technical matters can be more malleable. There was both irritation and irony in the man's response (27). He suggested their eagerness to hear a repetition of the evidence could derive only from a desire to become disciples of Jesus. In answer to his irony, the opponents resorted to scorn. His mention of discipleship prompted them to claim to be *disciples of Moses*. This was apparently a rarely used description, but it highlights the superior place given to Moses in their thoughts than they gave to Jesus. The contrast sums up the long-running conflict between Judaism and Christianity. There is a refusal here to consider the true origin of Jesus. Not only so, they were refusing to give credence to the testimony of anyone whose origins they did not know (29). For them no personal experience, however remarkable, was of any consequence.

There is obviously food for thought here concerning all debates about supernatural healing. The Pharisees of Jesus' time used arguments strikingly similar to those employed by some medical authorities today.

It is no wonder that the man became more and more cutting in his remarks (30-33). The debate over the origins of Jesus found no place in his matter-of-fact approach to experience. Nevertheless, the man argued the matter in a series of steps: his sight had been restored; he suggested that God hears only those who do his will, not sinners; hence, since he was convinced the healing was from God, the healer could not be a sinner; there was no precedent for a mere man opening the eyes of a man blind from birth; therefore, the healer must have been from God. The theologically minded Jews at last saw that they could make no headway with a man who could argue in such a manner; so they ejected him (34), possibly by excommunication, but not before a parting snipe at him. They charged him with being born in sin, a tacit admission of his blindness from birth which they had earlier questioned. They were more concerned to show contempt for his former condition than pleasure for his present restoration.

9:35-41 Jesus' comments on spiritual blindness. This concluding section of the narrative depicts the man's discussion with Jesus and reaches its climax with his declaration of faith. Jesus took the initiative in seeking out the man. He at once issued a challenge to faith, a connection with miracles as signs found elsewhere in John's gospel. But the most significant thing about the question is the use of the title *Son of Man*. Elsewhere in this gospel the idea of faith in the Son of Man occurs (3:14-15). Whatever John meant by the title, the man's lack of understanding is clear. His question (36) was probably because he had not seen Jesus before. As soon as Jesus explained that he was the Son of Man the healed man at once believed, which suggested he had already had the seeds of faith in him. In fact, the whole narrative shows a progressive development of understanding leading to faith. The words, *Lord, I believe*, may not reach as far as a full recognition of the lordship of Christ. The word *Lord* could be simply a polite form of address, but when linked with faith more probably points to a deepening appreciation of the character of Jesus. This is especially evident in his act of worship. At first sight v 39 stands in contradiction with 3:17. Yet since 3:18 speaks of judgment, it must be understood rather as the inevitable effect of the coming of Jesus, but not its

main purpose. The mission of Jesus brought people to the point of crisis. The healed man's crisis had been faced in his excommunication, which was further sealed by his act of worship of Jesus.

The antitheses—non—seeing and seeing, seeing and becoming blind—are one of the characteristic features of John's gospel. The notion of sight is used in different ways. The blind man had received both physical and spiritual sight. The Pharisees possessed natural sight and thought they possessed spiritual sight, but their reaction to Jesus showed they were really blind. It was in this sense that his coming had brought judgment. John notes the total lack of understanding among the Pharisees (40-41). The question *Are we also blind?* underlined their incredulity. Jesus' reply, *If you were blind*, can be understood in two ways. It could mean, 'If you were really conscious of your blindness', *i.e.* in a spiritual sense, for if they were, they would desire illumination which they clearly did not. In this sense the following words, *you would not be guilty of sin*, would mean they would then have been open to the redemptive mission of Jesus. This is more likely than to suppose that Jesus meant 'If you were really blind you would be guiltless because you would be unable to see'. Jesus was claiming that wilful blindness carried with it guilt; in this case the guilt of rejection of God's messenger. John sees this as an important challenge applicable to his readers, including, of course, ourselves.

Study 5 - Lazarus

John 11:1-53

This account of the raising of Lazarus has been objected to on two grounds: its extraordinary character and the silence of the other gospels. Its extraordinary character is an objection only if it is supposed that miracles do not happen. Moreover, in face of the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ it cannot be said that the resurrection of Lazarus is incredible. Although the synoptic gospels do not record this miracle, Luke contains the story of the raising of the widow's son (Lk. 7:11). Some have suggested that this account is a development from Luke's story of the rich man and Lazarus, but there are few parallels apart from the similar name. There is no sound reason to dispute the historical character of this account.

John makes clear the identity of Lazarus and especially his relation to Mary who anointed Jesus, although he does not relate this incident until later in the gospel (ch. 12). John either assumes that the readers will be familiar with it, or else that they will read the gospel more than once. When John records the sisters' request he uses the word *phileō* for love, but in v 5 the rather stronger word *agapaō* is used. Some scholars have deduced from this and similar evidence that Lazarus was the 'beloved disciple' who wrote the gospel. This would imply that Lazarus was in the upper room with the apostles, but this is highly unlikely. Jesus' words *This sickness will not end in death* (4) mean that the purpose of the sickness was not death but in the glorification of the Son of God. This may be compared with other signs in this gospel (*cf.* 2:11; 9:3). The glory of God is more significant than the sickness.

The report sent to Jesus and the consequent discussion between Jesus and his disciples raises an important theological problem. V 6 states that Jesus delayed for two days. Why? In the context there is a definite connection between that delay and Jesus' love for the Bethany family. The delay cannot, therefore, be considered as a lack of care. The sequel provides the answer, for Jesus intended that the experience of Lazarus should be glorifying to God (4) and a means for leading the disciples to faith (15). The disciples are seen first as fearful for the safety of Jesus if he returned to Judea (7-8). V 8 links with 10:31, showing the close connection between chs 10 and 11. In the light of 10:39 the disciples' apprehensions are understandable. The district where they were at that time was less hostile than Judea. No doubt the disciples were relieved when Jesus delayed his journey and were hoping that he would abandon it altogether. Jesus' reference to the twelve hours of the day does not at first sight seem to answer the objection of v 8. But the connection of thought is that the hours of the day are not affected by external circumstances. They are there to be used. Jesus' hour had not yet come (*i.e.* the twelfth hour) and until God willed that it should come, the only course to adopt was to go about one's mission.

Both the Jews and the Romans divided the hours of daylight into twelve. These hours were, therefore, not all sixty minutes long but varied in length according to the time of the year. The metaphors of light and darkness and the ideas of walking and stumbling were intended to contrast the unerring progress of Jesus with the fumbling efforts of the Jews to stop it (9-10).

At v 11 we meet another instance, so familiar in this gospel, of misunderstanding through taking a metaphorical statement too literally. The idea of death as sleep (12-13) is paralleled in Hellenistic sources and in the OT. That the disciples took the words of Jesus literally is not surprising in view of the fact that the message about Lazarus concerned his illness, not his death. Sleep would have been a hopeful sign in any illness. When Jesus announced he would recover there would not have seemed any necessity in their minds for a raising from death. Following John's explanation how the confusion had arisen (13), Jesus made the clear statement that Lazarus was dead, and the tense of the verb underlines the apparent finality of it. At first sight the statement that Jesus was glad he was not there (14) must have mystified the disciples. But Jesus had a reason to be glad other than the restoration of Lazarus. In line with the purpose of the gospel, John points to the possibility of the development of faith in the disciples. It is almost as if Jesus was concentrating more specifically on the training of the Twelve than on the needs of the two sisters of Lazarus. His mission was bound up with the bringing of the disciples to faith. It must be supposed that Jesus was intending belief of a much fuller kind than the disciples had as yet shown. Although later on attention is drawn to Thomas's doubt, his reaction here did not arise from doubt, but resignation (16).

Vs 17-27 focus on a conversation between Jesus and Martha and are the most theological of the whole narrative. Evidently Jesus was met on the outskirts of Bethany (*cf.* v 30) and was informed that Lazarus had died four days previously (17). The statement here does not contradict the fact that Jesus already knew of Lazarus's death (as v 14 shows). The nearness of Bethany to Jerusalem is mentioned here to account for the presence of so many Jews who had come to comfort the sisters (18-19). Martha's action in going out to meet Jesus agrees with the portrait of her as a person of action in Lk. 10:38-42. Mary sitting at home is the same reflective rather inactive person found in Luke's account. Martha's words in v 21 are identical with those of Mary in v 32, which suggests that the sisters had arrived at this conclusion after discussing the possibilities. There was clearly a strong faith in the power of Jesus to heal. But Martha's faith went further than that as v 22 shows. Martha appears to have been reaching out for a ray of hope in affirming her belief that God would answer any request of Jesus. *Your brother will rise again* (23) has a double meaning. Martha took it as a conventional assurance of the resurrection at the last day, but Jesus had a

further intention. It is hardly surprising that Martha missed the implication of an immediate rising from the dead.

The highlight of the narrative is the 'I am' saying in v 25. Jesus identified himself with both *resurrection* and *life*, which are complementary aspects of the same thing. Nevertheless, it was the purpose of the mission of the resurrected Christ to bring life in the fullest sense. Resurrection comes before life because new life is the product of resurrection. The way to that life is by means of faith, and Jesus challenged Martha on this ground. Jesus was not asking for a confession of faith in himself but in his statement; the emphasis here falls on the content of faith. Martha's response (27) bears a striking similarity to John's statement of purpose (20:31), as if her confession forms the pattern which the whole gospel is intended to support. It is impossible to say how much Martha understood of the Messiahship or Sonship of Jesus. But there is no doubt that to John the content of her statement was of utmost importance. Faith that fell short of so exalted a concept of Christ was inadequate.

Vs 28-37 portray first the reaction of Mary and then that of the Jews who had come to mourn with the sisters. Mary's part in the story can be summarized as follows: Jesus sent Martha for her (28); she immediately responded (29); she fell down at Jesus' feet and repeated the same statement that Martha had made; her tears brought distress to Jesus, who also wept (33-35). Mary is seen here as more emotional than Martha. Even the Jewish mourners add pathos to the scene. They are shown as consoling Mary and following her to the tomb (31); as being touched by the sight of Jesus' tears (36); and as speculating on why Jesus had not prevented this sad happening. The climax is reached in the words *he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled* (33). The meaning of the word translated *deeply moved* implies anger and indignation, even outrage. A problem arises over the cause of this outburst. Some have suggested moral indignation at sin which causes death and at the sorrow which follows from it. But such indignation must have continually been in the mind of Jesus, whereas here there seems to be a specific occasion for such expression. Was this caused by the sympathy of Jesus for the sisters? The force of the verb seems to be too strong for that. Was it because of the unreality of the Jewish expression of grief? This is at least a possibility since any show of hypocrisy may well have aroused his anger. It may well be that something of the pathos of human suffering was bearing on Jesus as he knew that his own cup of suffering was so close. The troubling of his spirit proceeded from within. Perhaps it was his knowledge of the strength of unbelief of some of them, who would oppose him even after witnessing the raising of Lazarus. The question in v 37 links this present sign with that of the blind man in ch. 9. They granted the possibility of keeping a man from dying, but they could not conceive of a raising from the dead.

The account of the miracle is relatively brief and is marked by reserve, but all the details have about them the ring of truth. The words *Did I not tell you?* (40) relate to what Jesus had told the disciples, not Martha. But his words to Martha implied the same intention. Or else the words may be taken as addressing the disciples rather than as a response to Martha. The prayer of Jesus (41-42) is significant because of its emphasis on faith in his mission. The reserve in the account is particularly seen in the simple description of Lazarus coming out of the tomb.

11:45-57 The results of the miracle

John brings out several different reactions to the sign. Some believed (45); some reported the incident to the authorities (46); the Pharisees discussed the matter in the Sanhedrin and decided to plot Jesus' death (47-53); while Jesus himself withdrew towards the wilderness. Even a sign as remarkable as this will not convince those who are determined not to believe. The Sanhedrin's discussion centred on the miraculous signs. They were not questioning that Jesus was performing

signs; their fear was that *everyone* (i.e. except themselves) would believe in Jesus. The question *What are we accomplishing?* (47) was a rhetorical question to which the answer was 'nothing'. But the deeper fear was of the Romans (48). Their concept of people believing in Jesus was dominated by political considerations. The *place* was either the temple or the city, and the *nation* was added to refer to the administration, some of which was still in Jewish hands. John attaches great importance to the fact that Caiaphas was high priest that year since he mentions it twice (49, 51). This was because of the significance of the statement he made in v 50. That it was better for one man to die than for the whole nation to perish may seem a counsel of prudence, but John sees it as establishing a principle that one man might substitute for the people, so fundamental to the NT doctrine of atonement. It is all the more noteworthy because it was uttered by the religious representative who helped to put it into effect. John's comment (51) shows that he understands the statement as having implications far beyond Caiaphas's limited understanding, for the principle was to have universal consequences. John sees the unifying purpose of the death of Christ in gathering together the children of God, a term here used for all who would come to believe in Jesus (52).

The setting for the plotting of the Jews was the pre-Passover activity, which consisted of purification rites. Reports had been passed round about Jesus' signs and the Pharisees' plot. Inevitably speculation followed about Jesus' movements. John mentions the official plot to kill Jesus to set the scene for the anointing and for the entry into Jerusalem.

Study 6 – Palm Sunday

John 12:12-19

At this period Passover crowds could be immense. The desire of the crowd to greet Jesus was again in marked contrast to the official line. The use of *palm branches* originated at the Feast of Tabernacles, but it had become associated with other feasts by this time (13). The waving of them was a sign of honour for a victorious person. The chant of *Hosanna* comes from Ps. 118:25-26 which was one of the psalms chanted at the ascent towards Jerusalem. The title *King of Israel* shows clearly the Messianic significance of the chant. In vs 14-15 John cites Zc. 9:9 in support of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on a young donkey rather than on a war horse. Once again John mentions a case of lack of understanding on the part of the disciples. It was only after the resurrection, here referred to as the glorification of Jesus, that any of them understood.

There appear to be two different crowds mentioned in vs 17-18. One group had seen the miracle of Lazarus's restoration, and the other group had only heard of it. The events caused despair on the part of the Pharisees because they would not so easily be able to carry out their plan. There is despairing exaggeration on their part in claiming *the whole world has gone after him* (see vs 42-43). For a parallel instance of exaggeration cf. 11:48.