

3 September 2006

### **“Stupendous or Preposterous”**

Reading: John 1:1-18; Text: John 20:30-31

Let me not beat around the bush! We make claims that are either true or they are ridiculous. If they are not true ... from a logical point of view they are absurd and from a religious point of view they are blasphemous. They are stupendous or they are preposterous. And if these bold claims are false, I and millions of preachers, past and present, should be pitied or possibly even certified.

I am not attempting to be melodramatic here. Most of us have been taught to believe certain things since childhood. There are some genuine advantages to this. But there is one very real disadvantage. We can become so familiar with certain concepts that we lose sight of their import. We can become almost blasé about the most mind-blowing assertions. We forget that the gospel we proclaim cannot simply be a pleasant little palliative. It is either true or it is so absurd as to warrant ridicule and invite contempt. C. S. Lewis was spot on when he said:

Christianity is a statement which, if false, is of no importance, and, if true, of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important.<sup>1</sup>

I am going to ask you to judge that for yourself as we consider the message of John's Gospel over the next three months. Those who have read all four Gospels will probably have noticed that John differs in several respects from the other three. For one thing, John leaves us in no doubt whatsoever why he is writing. Each of the Evangelists has a plan, but Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us about the ministry of Jesus in such a way as to lead us to certain conclusions. John not only narrates the story but tells us explicitly why he is doing so. He spells it out for us. Throughout his Gospel, John uses simple language to convey profound thought, and he tells us exactly why he is writing. This morning our attention is upon a brief passage, at the end of chapter 20, in which he explains the purpose of his Gospel.

Jesus did many other miraculous 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 believing you may have life in his name. (20:30-31)

### **Conviction and Dogmatism**

John writes with clear conviction. He does not, for one moment, claim to know all that there is to know, but he is not speculating about life in general. He is convinced that he does know some things for sure. And we can hear that note of quiet but authoritative confidence in his writings.

We live at a time when people have an aversion to dogmatism. I don't know about you, but I find dogmatic people quite irritating. A dogmatic person is somebody who holds certain opinions and will not even consider an alternative point of view. They are opinionated but usually their opinions are not thought through. Yet they assert them with vehemence and sometimes with arrogance. Somebody has said that they have minds like concrete - thoroughly mixed up and permanently settled.

As Christians we should never be opinionated or dogmatic in that sense. There are many things we don't know and we should be the first to admit that. This does not mean that we cannot have convictions on some really important matters. There is something decidedly distasteful about a person trying to force their opinions on you when these are the product of their own wisdom or perception. But we are convinced that something has happened in human history that gives us a decisive clue to its meaning. We did not work it out for ourselves, so when we tell others about it, we are not suggesting that we are more perceptive or wiser than they are. We are convinced that God has revealed it so that ordinary people like us can understand it. With his usual insight, John Stott pinpoints the difference between know-it-all dogmatism and humble conviction.

We need to distinguish between superficially similar words like assurance, conviction, presumption and bigotry. Conviction is the state of being convinced, and assurance of being sure, by adequate evidence or argument, that something is true. Presumption is a premature assumption of its truth, a

confidence resting on inadequate or unexamined premises. Bigotry is both blind and obstinate; the bigot closes his eyes to the data and clings to his opinions regardless. Presumption and bigotry are incompatible with any serious concern for truth and with worship of the God of truth. At least some degree of Christian assurance is, however, both compatible and reasonable, for it is grounded on good historical evidence or, as the New Testament writers call it, 'witness'.<sup>2</sup>

John is convinced that he is right about Jesus, and if he is, the statement we are examining is the most important that can be made to anyone, anywhere and at any time. It is as valid in 2006 as it was when John wrote it. So let's look at it.

### **Key Terms**

The two sentences in this passage contain five terms that help us to get inside John's Gospel. Indeed, they take us right to the heart of the Christian faith. I shall briefly explain each of them, focusing particularly on one of them. I have chosen to do this for two reasons. In the first place, it helps to introduce you to the Gospel of John as a whole. Secondly, and more importantly, here he presents us with the central message of Christianity. If somebody tells you that keeping the "Golden Rule" is the essence of Christianity, they are making a huge mistake. As important as it is to "do to others what you would have them do to you" (Mt 7:12), this precept cannot be extracted from the sayings of Jesus and made to float in midair. Read the entire New Testament and you will see that the teaching enunciated by John in the passage before us is the foundation on which everything else is built. So here are the five key terms in an order that is slightly different from that of the passage. They recur throughout the Gospel.

- Signs
- The Christ
- The Son of God
- Life
- Believe

I shall italicize them in and then we'll take them one at a time with the assistance of the PowerPoint.

Jesus did many other miraculous *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 believing you may have *life* in his name. (20:30-31)

### Signs

The first of these terms is "**signs**" - the NIV renders it "miraculous signs" to bring out its clear sense. There are two important things for us to notice in this sentence. The first is that we have a record of only a fraction of the miracles that Jesus performed. At the end of the next chapter John uses hyperbole to convey just how much Jesus did:

Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written. (21:25)

Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us as much. In addition to specified miracles, they make blanket statements about Jesus healing many. For example, Luke records a time "when the sun was setting (and) the people brought to Jesus all who had various kinds of sickness, and laying his hands on each one, he healed them. (Luke 4:40; cf. Mark 1:32-34) Matthew mentions that after Jesus drove the money changers out of the temple, "the blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them." (Mt. 21:14) When he spoke to those gathered in Cornelius' house, Peter explained "how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil." (Acts 10:38) So what we have in the Gospels is by no means an exhaustive list.

The second thing we should notice is the word John chooses to describe these miracles. There are four Greek words that can be used to describe miracles. One is fairly general and means "works": they are *deeds* (*erga*). A second places emphasis on the fact that they cause amazement: they are *wonders* (*terata*). A third stresses the fact that they require God's power: they are *mighty works* (*dunameis*). But John's preference is a word that stresses their purpose: they are *signs* (*ση̃εια*). A genuine miracle is usually all of these things. It is a deed that requires God's power and occasions

wonder. But as far as John is concerned it is, first and foremost, a sign, a pointer. It not only *shows* us something; it *tells* us something. It may be impressive but that's not the important thing. It signifies; it authenticates. That's why Peter declares on the Day of Pentecost:

'Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth, a man accredited by God to you by miracles (*dunamesi*), wonders (*teras*) and signs (*semeiois*), which God did among you through him ...' (Acts 2:22)

### **The Christ**

The question is: What do these signs tell us? Well, John is crystal clear:

Jesus did many other miraculous *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* ...

That's the next word we need to glance at. Jesus is the Christ. We tend to use the term as a last name. But it is the Greek word for the Hebrew *Meshiach* which means "anointed one" and referred to one whom God would anoint with his Spirit and raise up to be a special deliverer of his people. They expected him to come and they knew he would be very special. Understandably, different traditions developed concerning the expected Messiah. It was not easy for Jews to understand how one person could be prophet, priest and king. (Deut 18:14-16; Heb 7:1-17; John 7:26, 27, 31, 40, 41, 42) And, as per usual, God did more, much more, than they expected. There were statements that they would not have understood and that certainly puzzled the prophets who wrote them. (1 Pet 1:10-12) For example, Isaiah 9:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given,  
And the government will be on his shoulders,  
And he will be called,  
Wonderful Counselor,  
Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father,  
Prince of Peace. (Is 9:6)

How could a *child* born to the nation of Israel and into the family of David be described as "Mighty God" (*El Gibbor*) and as "Father of Eternity"? That brings us to the third term.

## The Son of God

But these are written that you may *believe* that Jesus is *the Christ, the Son of God* ...

Here is a term that is open to misunderstanding if we take it out of context. I am not going to attempt a full explanation this morning. But by looking at the way John uses this term we shall be able to determine its essential meaning.

- For us, "son" usually conveys two ideas: a special relationship and an origin.
- John uses the word in the first sense but not in the second.
- Again and again he tells us about the unique relationship between the Father and the Son. Let me give you just one example. Listen to the words of Jesus when he was criticized for healing a man on the Sabbath day:

Jesus said to them, 'My Father is always at work to this very day, and I too am working ... I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees the Father doing because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the father loves the son and shows him all he does.' (5:17-20)

Remember, people did not refer to God as "Father". It was only Jesus who did that and we call God our Father because of Jesus. (Gal 4:4-7) So the relationship between Jesus and the Father was and is absolutely unique. He is God's one and only Son.

- But there is an important difference between this Son and what we normally understand by the term 'son'. This Son never had a beginning.

John doesn't want us to miss that point. Listen to how he commences his Gospel:

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made. Without him nothing was made that has been made. (1:1-3)

I shall talk a little about the meaning of this verse next week. Today I need to point out that John is describing Jesus and that this is a perfectly good translation, both from a grammatical and from a theological point of view. One translation brings out the sense of the verse when it translates the last clause "what God was, the Word was."

John's statement here is intentional. He knew exactly what he was saying. If we think of it, this is an amazing statement, coming, as it did, from one who knew the man Jesus intimately. John was Jesus' cousin. He had heard him and looked upon him and seen him and touched him with his own hands. (1 John 1:1-3) He traveled with him and ate with him; he saw Jesus hungry and tired and he witnessed his death on the cross. But here he tells us something astonishing. The first word of the Hebrew Bible is the word "בְּרֵאשִׁית" - "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." In the LXX (Septuagint - the Greek translation of the OT) this is translated "En archē." In other words, "the beginning" takes us back to the time when only God existed. Nothing had been created. John was aware of this verse and, no doubt, of its Greek translation. But here's what he says: "In the beginning (*en archē*), when nobody and nothing but God existed, the Word was already there. He was there with God and he himself was fully divine." For good measure, he underlines the point: "He was with God in the beginning. Through him *all things* were made. Without him nothing was made that has been made." See what I mean: profundity of thought, simplicity of language?

John re-enforces this declaration that the Son of God is eternal by the statements he records. Listen to John the Baptist. He points out a man coming toward him. He explains, "This is the one I meant when

I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me *because he was before me.*' (1:30; *my italics*) Now, John the Baptist was a little older than Jesus. So he was referring to something other than natural age. And John, the apostle, wants us to notice that.

Listen to Jesus himself. He was in an altercation with some of his compatriots about Abraham. They insisted that Abraham was their father. Jesus claimed that Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing his (Jesus') day. They responded: "You are not yet fifty years old and you have seen Abraham!" "I tell you the truth, Jesus answered, before Abraham was born, *I am!*" (8:56-59; *my italics*)

John also lets us know just how offensive these statements were to Jewish ears. Earlier, when Jesus has spoken of the intimacy of his relationship with the Father, he tells us that "they tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, *making himself equal with God.*" (5:18; *my italics*) Here John comments: "At this they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds." (8:59)

This has been the historic teaching of the church for two thousand years. They affirmed that Jesus was the eternal Son of God even when they could not understand the implications of this affirmation. The early church fathers used terms like "the eternal generation of the Son" to make the point that he was divine and had never been created. This has to be important. One human being in all of history is entitled to this designation. This man, who grew up in a despised town in a second rate Roman province, was Immanuel - God with us. Nothing like it had ever happened before and nothing like it has ever happened since.

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us in his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. (Heb 1:1-2)

And I need to tell you that according to John, this is what it's all about. The big question when we stand before our Maker will not be about our merits or demerits. It will be about Jesus. Jesus himself made this very plain. Speaking to the religious establishment of his day he said:

'You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.' (5:39-40)

And John makes no bones about it:

'Whoever believes in him is not condemned but whoever does not believe is condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.' (3:18)

That brings me to the two final words we are examining this morning.

## **Life**

Jesus did many other miraculous 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 believing you may have *life* in his name. (20:30-31)

We shall see them again, so I shall not take long over them today. But they are germane to all that John teaches so we must at least identify their main meaning.

The word '**life**' is one of John's recurrent words. As soon as John has introduced us to the Word, he makes a great declaration about him: "In him was *life* and the life was the light of men." (1:4) Again and again, he speaks about this life. And, interestingly, it is not something we receive in 'the sweet by and by'. John uses the present tense. It is something that starts here and now. Indeed, we cannot live a genuine spiritual life without it. That's because, from a spiritual point of view, we are dead. But by a work of

his divine power, God gives us this life. The life comes in and the light goes on. That's why it is so important that we are born from above. Nothing less will do!

### **Believe**

The word '**believe**' is used over ninety times in John's Gospel, always as a verb. We sometimes use the word believe to mean no more than mental assent. That's not how John uses it.

Over a hundred years ago, a Scot by the name of John Patten traveled to the New Hebrides, a group of islands in the South West Pacific. The islanders were cannibals and, not surprisingly, they didn't have a word for "belief" or "trust" in their language. It's difficult to trust people when they may be looking upon you as their next meal. Just how do you tell people the good news about Jesus when you can't even find a word for "trust"? The term is so prominent in all we say about God that it is virtually indispensable.

Eventually Patten did find a way to convey the meaning of belief. A man came into his room. Without a word, Patten raised both of his feet off the floor, leant back in his chair and watched the puzzled look on the man's face. He then asked, "What am I doing now?" In reply, the native used a word which literally meant "to lean one's whole weight upon". That was it! Patten had the word he was looking for. From then on he was able to explain to the islanders what true belief really is.

To believe is to relinquish all hope of making it on your own. It is to realize that God has gone to enormous lengths to save you - to restore spiritual life to you and to lean your entire weight upon him

### **Conclusion**

So there it is. Let me ask you whether you have ever trusted Jesus in that simple but implicit way? I have to tell you that if you haven't, your spiritual life has not started. You are still dead in your trespasses and sins. But I can also tell you that this sad state of affairs is totally unnecessary. "These (things) are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name."

### Notes

1. C. S. Lewis, *Timeless at Heart*, Christian Apologetics (Fount) quoted by Nicky Gumbel, *Questions of Life* (Eastbourne: Kingsway Publishers, 1993), 17
2. John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Challenge of Preaching Today* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1982), 86. David Bosch also emphasizes the compatibility of an approach that is at once humble and convinced. The incompleteness of our knowledge cannot deter us from testifying to what we believe to be important.

We know only in part, but we do know. And we believe that the faith we profess is both true and just, and should be proclaimed. We do this, however, not as judges or lawyers, but as witnesses; not as soldiers but as envoys of peace; not as high-pressure salespersons, but as ambassadors of the Servant Lord. David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991)