

The four Gospel accounts are a treasure-trove of information about the person and character of God the Father, and His Son Jesus our Christ. God's Word speaks to us each day, and in every season of our lives, His Word is fresh to us.

Since January, we (at Botley Baptist) have been going through the Gospel of John. Writing towards the end of the first century, about 25 years after Jerusalem had fallen (70AD), John was *likely* the last Apostle to chronicle Jesus' life.

He was writing to a fast-growing, non-Jewish audience, who would not have been familiar with Jewish customs, rites and rituals; John tucks in little phrases to explain what was familiar *only* to Jews. e.g. describing Jesus' first miracle of turning water into wine at a wedding in the village of Cana, John writes, "Nearby stood six stone water jars, *the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing*, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons."¹

Again, narrating Jesus' encounter with a woman of Samaria at Jacob's Well, John writes, "The Samaritan woman said to him, 'You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?' (*For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.*)"² We find such thoughtful notes and explanation, dotted through John's Gospel. John is writing for a future audience who won't know the background of many things.

By the time of this writing John has, for many years, been taking care of Mary the mother of Jesus, as he would his own mother. Years of conversations with her would have opened John's mind to appreciate Jesus the son of Mary, whom very few people knew. Living in Ephesus, John is also privy to written and verbal accounts of the correspondence between Churches by Paul, Peter,

¹ John 2:6

² John 4:9

Barnabas as they hammered out theology, dealt with issues causing conflict in Churches, and most importantly, they sifted Truth from fiction.

The first 12 chapters of John's Gospel offers us a fast-paced, whirl-wind journey through three years of Jesus' earthly ministry, which ends with Jesus **shouting** to the crowds, *"If you trust me, you are trusting not only me, but also God who sent me. ... I don't speak on my own authority. The Father who sent me has commanded me what to say **and how to say it**. I know his commands lead to eternal life; so I say whatever the Father tells me to say."*

The action screeches to a halt, very abruptly. John devotes the next five chapters to his eyewitness account of a single night: the night before the day Jesus died. He is very exacting in presenting details of that night, each act and word, seared into John's memory.

This is a backdrop to the Gospel and I hope also to our passage today, John 6, the day after Jesus fed 5,000 men, plus women and children, and rescued 12 Disciples from a raging storm on the Sea of Galilee.

John sets the scene: The huge crowd that followed Jesus to the far side (the east) of the Sea of Galilee, were so engrossed in Jesus' words and deeds, they forgot about food. Even a little boy carrying five small barley loaves and two kippers of fish home for dinner, was so engrossed in Jesus, he forgot about folk at home waiting for dinner! He would have found his way to the front where Andrew spotted him and told Jesus, *"There's a small boy with 5 small barley cakes and 2 kippers, but what good is that for this humongous crowd!"*

If you can imagine Wembley Arena (not Stadium) which seats 12,500, you would not be wrong in judging the size of the crowd on the hillside where Jesus taught and fed them on fish and bread.

People are very observant. They **saw** the Disciples take the **only** boat, and realised Jesus had not gone with them. Word had spread across the lake and people from Tiberias (west shore) crossed over to the east, and not finding Jesus there, someone would have said, *“Well, I know he has a home in Capernaum; let’s go there!”* Off they went and found Him there, *“Rabbi! How did you get here?”*

Jesus does not answer their question. He could have said, *“You know there was a howling storm last night, so I walked over the Sea of Galilee to help My disciples. The moment I boarded their boat, they realised we had instantly reached the shore. That’s when and how I came here.”*

It’s like going to see a magician do his tricks, then ask him, *Tell me how you did it?* His reply would be, *You saw what you came to see!*

Jesus who knows what is in the hearts of all people, turned the question around. *You don’t want to know how I got here! Let me tell you why **YOU** came here: because you want more food miraculously provided by Me!* They were quite unaffected by the wisdom of Jesus’ words and the beauty of His deeds, but a miracle that produced food in abundance was precisely what they wanted; and so there was an excited, but impure enthusiasm, very unwelcome to Jesus.

It helps to know the reason we ask God a question, than the answer to the question itself. Those who followed Jesus around Galilee wanted bread (food), but more than bread, they also wanted to know, *If you can pull off miracles like that, surely you can get the Romans off our backs!* They were driven to make Jesus King, of an earthly kingdom!

But that’s not why He left Heaven for earth. Jesus’ reply is very apt! *“The amount of energy you spent looking for me around the Sea of Galilee hoping for more food, if only you would spend that energy working for the food that lasts, and*

nourishes your life, and leads you to eternal life that only I, the Son of Man can give! What I give has God's stamp of approval."

The crowds response is the human problem right through human history: every generation from the first man and woman, has bought into the lie, that we need to **DO** something to gain God's favour.

In school, I wasn't very good in mathematics, until I met professor Kennedy in university, who taught to love numbers. Teaching basic algebra he said, *An equation is about creating a relationship between equals: what is to the left of the equal sign, must balance with what is to the right of the equal sign. BUT it is vitally important you get the order correct, failing which your equation will have disastrous results!*

So, the equation which defines our relationship with God, should be properly stated:

God is not pleased with us BECAUSE we DO His work;

God loves us and is pleased with us when we reciprocate His love, by spending time worshipping Him, striving to draw closer in our relationship with Him.

ONLY THEN will He invite us to join Him in His work!

It is foolish to think we can do God's work for Him! This is exactly what the people thought they could do, to earn God's favour. Their second question is, *"We want to perform God's works too! What should we do?"*

The question they wanted answered was, *"Tell us what to do, so we can get what we want from You. We want Your miracle bread and for You to be our Miracle King; just tell us what to do to get it."*

They had the equation the wrong way around! They seemed sure that if only Jesus told them **what** to do, they could please God by their works for God.

For these people, as with many people today, pleasing God is found in the right formula for performing works that will please God. The **Church** says, *'Follow these Rites and Rituals.'* The **moralist** says, *'Do this and that, and not this and that'* providing a long list of do's and don'ts. The **social reformer** says, *'Culture and education is all that matters.'*

But Jesus says, *"This is the only work God wants from you: Believe in the One He has sent."*

The crowd's first question was, *Miracles seem to come naturally to you! Tell us how you got here!*, and Jesus does not answer this.

Their second question was, *Tell us what we need to do, so You will always provide our needs?*

Now their third question is, *Show us a miraculous sign, if you want us to believe in you. ... Moses provided bread from Heaven for our ancestors in the desert, what can you do for us?*

Revd C. F. Andrews of Newcastle-on-Tyne and an ordained Priest in the Church of England, became a close friend of Mahatma Gandhi, and they journeyed together exploring the Bible. Mahatma Gandhi was very close to accepting Christ, but stumbled on this question, *If Jesus Christ would appear to me and reveal himself to me now, I will accept Him as Lord!*

You see, to place conditions before God and ask Him to respond or perform as we wish, is to belittle the person of God. There are times I struggle with songs which use the lines, *come to my heart, Lord Jesus! There is room in my heart for*

*Thee*³ or similar, which has a lovely poetic resonance, but I feel is reducing the grandeur and majesty of the Godhead into available space in my heart.

This third question the crowds had for Jesus was, “*What can you do for me/us?*”

Once again, Jesus has to set the record straight: *It wasn't Moses who gave you bread from Heaven; it was MY FATHER! He gave you bread from Heaven that nourished you and kept you going until you entered the land promised to Abraham. Now, I offer you REAL bread to feed on, and this REAL Bread will sustain you until you enter God's promised eternal kingdom!*

The crowd's final question was, *Give us that bread everyday!* All they could think of was their material needs. *Be our King, remove the oppressor and feed us everyday, all we might ever need!*

I sense Jesus frustration as He delivers the crux of His message. To understand the impact of what He said, we need to travel back in time in history, when Moses stood before the burning bush and asked, “*If I go to the people of Israel and tell them, ‘the God of your ancestors has sent me to you’, they will ask me, ‘What is his Name?’, then what should I tell them?*”

And God replied, **I AM who I AM!** Tell them, **I AM has sent you.**⁴

Jesus uses this very title when He says to the crowds, **I AM** the bread of life. Whoever **comes** to me will never again be hungry, and whoever **believes** in me will never again be thirsty.

This is what irked the people who took offence at Jesus' use of the term **I AM...** *We know who he is! He is the son of the carpenter in Nazareth. How dare He claim to have come down from Heaven!*

³ Hymn: “Thou didst leave Thy throne and Thy kingly crown”. by Ira David Sankey (1840-1908)

⁴ Exodus 3:13-14

You see, for many, this narrative is a mirror on their lives. The starting point of their relationship with Jesus is, *How did you do that?* If the magician won't tell you how he does his tricks, it's not a question Jesus wants to answer. He is more interested in, *Why are you following me? To see me perform miracles, or to spend time with Me to learn about the plan God has for this world, and the part He wants you to play in it?*

There are those for whom this world here and now is more important than the promise of things to come. They are more interested in, *What do I need to do to keep God happy?*, as if God is miserable in His existence and needs us to do things to make and keep Him happy - as long as the hamster is on the wheel running with all its might, the wheel keeps spinning. Stop the hamster from running and the wheel stops!

Jesus tells us exactly what we need to do: *Whoever approaches Me with a view to **spending time** with Me to learn about my Father's kingdom, will never be hungry again; Whoever **believes** in Me will never be thirsty.*

To **come** to Jesus is an act of surrender; leaving behind all that entangles us, burdens us, distracts us, and to make a conscious decision to surrender to Jesus - *I have not been able to make sense of life, ... I have not been able to solve this problem in life, I come and surrender to you my Lord and Master.*

To **believe** in Jesus is to identify with Him, the reason He left Heaven to live among us, the purpose of His death by crucifixion, God's purpose in Jesus' resurrection, these are the primary things we identify with Jesus and accept what He has done.

Jesus is very clear what He is here to do: *"I will never refuse anyone who comes to me. For I have come down from Heaven, not to do what I want, but to do the will of*

Him who sent me. The will of Him who sent me is that I should not lose anything of what He has given me, but should raise it up when the last day comes. And this is the will of the One who sent me, that everyone who sees the Son and trusts in Him should have eternal life, and I will raise Him up when the last day comes.”

This is our call this morning, to surrender our lives to Jesus and to identify with Him. No more doing things **FOR** God, rather spending time in His word, delighting in His love for us by keeping us safe, day by day, providing for our needs, and sometimes our wants and desired too! The eternal **I AM** waits for you to respond.

AMEN.