`My Lord and my God': Jesus, honour and shame in the Gospel of John.

Whatever is found in the Scriptures has been put there for a purpose: it has some part to play in teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work. Clearly, God believes we need four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. It is the last of these – John – that I want to spend a short while discussing tonight.

Why did John write his Gospel when he did and how he did? We believe, rightly, that all scripture is given by inspiration of God (2 Tim 3:16) – that holy men spoke and wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:20-21). We believe that those who were engaged in writing these books were conscious of the authoritative nature of the statements they wrote down. Moreover, it is likely that John wrote his Gospel much later than the other Gospel writers: Mark probably wrote first, and was followed by Matthew and Luke. It is likely that John wrote last of all.

Each Gospel writer takes a different approach. I think that all Gospel writers had in mind that their work was needed and would be widely circulated. John is not writing in some vacuum that has no contact with the real world. As with all Gospel writers, he is aware of the contemporary situation facing believers and potential believers in his own day. He does not write to re-tell the events of Jesus’ ministry, or to give some detailed account of his teaching. He knows that Mark, Matthew and Luke have been written. In John’s day, however, questions of truth and honour had become hugely important – as indeed they are in our own day. There were apparently three events that had taken place that required the presentation of the material which he records in the Fourth Gospel.

First there were divisions. The Letters of John and the Fourth Gospel were written around the same time when there had been a division in the church: They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us (1 John 2:19). Professed believers had gone out from the majority, and in such a way that left major questions with regard to the core of the Gospel: – Who is Jesus? Who are the people of God - those who have gone and denied the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh, or those who continue to worship him?

Secondly there was the issue of honour and shame. When John wrote the Gospel, it seems that unbelieving Jews were particularly ferocious in their dishonouring of the Christian church. The question at this point is, ‘Who is it that honours God and is honoured by God?’ Jesus, Christian Jews and Gentiles or non-Christian Jews?

Thirdly, the Fourth Gospel was written at a time when there was a temptation to dilute the true uniqueness of Jesus. It is hard to think of a religion that would not find a place for Jesus. However, while Jesus could be tolerated and assimilated into various religious movements, it is not as the one who is the way, the truth and the life, and the one through whom people must enter and arrive in the presence of the Father (John 14:6). Jesus was not, in the eyes of many, perceived as unique, at least not for the
right reasons. ‘Who is Jesus? Where is he from? In what sense is he unique?’ These were prevalent questions in John’s contemporary world.

Such questions are also those that have relevance for our own age: What is truth? Who does one believe? Whose testimony is to be trusted? Who has the light, and who does not? Who is to be followed and who is not? Into such a situation the Spirit spoke to the apostle John and showed him the content of the Book of Revelation, enabled him to write one letter to a specific, though unidentified, community (1 John) and two letters to two other individuals (2 and 3 John). Moreover, he inspired him to select out of all that could be written on Jesus the content of the Gospel of John to encourage believers to maintain their distinctiveness in the midst of an imperfect church, a dishonouring community, and a world that diminishes the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. John knew only too well that only as believers remained distinctive could they continue to be effective.

However, while John probably wrote this Gospel sometime in the second last decade of the first century, this does not mean that the early church knew nothing of the distinctive teaching contained in this Gospel before it was written. It is likely that the preaching of the church would have included the teaching contained in the Fourth Gospel long before it was written down. After all, the disciples were promised that the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, would reveal to them the things of Jesus – that which he had already spoken and other things beyond that which had been revealed. Such teaching is essentially an exposition of that which Jesus had already brought to the world from the Father – only now magnificently confirmed as true and clarified with distinction through the lifting up of Jesus in his death, resurrection and ascension. Such Spirit-inspired teaching would probably have been communicated in oral fashion for many years, and parts of it may also have been in written form. It is contained in the apostolic preaching, and underlies all the letters in the New Testament. Thus, though the Gospel of John was the last to be written down, the teaching in it would not have been considered novel, but rather familiar.

However, what John does bring which is unique, and his own Spirit-inspired contribution includes the following: the comments and explanations which he himself makes as an author and editor (sometimes, it is not easy to see where this is distinct from the words of Jesus, e.g., John 3:16-21); the comments which he makes as a member of the believing community (e.g., ‘we have seen his glory’); and, in particular, the way in which presents the material which he has selected out of all that could be written (John 21:25). The Fourth Gospel is the application of unchanging apostolic truth to the situation which the church was facing towards the end of the first century.

In one sense, the Gospel of John is preaching of the best sort, preaching which focuses on the uniqueness of Jesus as the only one in whom the Father can be known; the only one through whom the Father can be glorified; the only one around whom the church can be united since he is the definitive revelation of God of who God is: the name of God, the word of God, the truth of God. The Gospel of John leaves the reader with the impression that worship of God can no longer take place without reference to truth that Jesus has brought from the Father.
It some ways, John is doing in his day what Isaiah was doing for his generation in the 8th century B.C. At that time, the professing people of God were facing a similar situation: schism in the professing people of God; intolerance of those who held to the truth about God; and a temptation to downplay the uniqueness of God over against the gods of Assyria, Babylon and the nations. Isaiah takes the truth about God which he has seen and presents it to the world – a truth that contains a message of salvation and judgement; a present salvation from a present judgement and a future salvation from a future judgement. At the heart of Isaiah’s message is a Davidic king and a suffering servant without whom the people of God - both Jews and Gentiles – cannot be part of the restored Zion who gathers in honour of the great ‘I am’.

On the basis of John chapter 12, it seems likely that both Jesus and John are aware that the message of salvation and judgement is as relevant to the first century as was Isaiah’s in the eighth century. It was a time in which the people of God needed encouragement to maintain their divinely commanded worship and to engage in their divinely given mission. It was not easy for believers at any point in the first century. The New Testament makes clear that the early church from its inception was challenged as to the content of their preaching: Jesus Christ. By the 80’s and 90’s, however, and especially around Ephesus where John probably wrote this Gospel, things were particularly severe. It would not at all have been easy to be different, to be distinct, to be a follower of the Way, the truth - Jesus.

After all, the culture to which these Christians belonged was a one in which communities were of huge importance and individualism was considered with suspicion. It was a culture characterised to a large degree by honour and shame. This meant that who one was in the community mattered a great deal. One’s name was important, one’s reputation and honour mattered. To have honour and be honoured was of no small matter. Shame, likewise, was very important in such societies. There were shameless people - those who did not care about groups or families, who had no concern for their own reputation or for the reputation of the group to which they were supposed to belong – whether by birth, choice or profession. Then, there were shamed people. These were people who were denied the honour due to them as part of the community. Their status was no longer an honourable one. In public opinion, they were not only looked down upon, but ready to be cast out of their society, facing a predicament that had huge implications for their own and their family’s ability to survive. Moreover, the family group to which they belonged would be under pressure to disown them or suffer a similar fate of dishonour. Such people who were shamed were denied their former status in society; they were no longer considered as those who had worth.

How does this apply to the Gospel of John? One can imagine how Jesus was viewed within such a society. He was considered by the Jews to have acted shamelessly, and was deemed by them to have been executed as a result – bearing the shame of the cross outside the camp bearing the reproach of his people (Heb 13:12-14). Those who ‘follow’ Jesus, moreover, are those who are certain to share the same disgrace as he did. Even though they are not put to death by crucifixion, they will be shunned by their own communities, often Jewish communities. They are rejected by their society, scorned by the majority as those who have no worth – treated as though they had no part in the people of God.
Early followers of Jesus were excluded from the Jewish community, made to feel that they were on the outside. Such an exclusion policy was made very official in the second last decade of the first century. We read of statements made by Jews to the effect that Christians were now understood as infidels who did not belong to the community of God’s people. Christians suffered shame and dishonour as those who followed a dishonoured Messiah. It would be very tempting to play down their distinctiveness in the face of such circumstances.

It is with such people in mind that this Gospel was written by John. He leaves the reader with the impression that it is not only Jesus and his followers who were counted as worthless and shameless, fit to be excluded from society; it is God himself who is being judged. John makes clear that God honoured Jesus and brought him to his presence, and he will honour all those who follow Jesus and bring them to be where the Father and Son dwell. To reject Jesus who claims to God’s Son and to reject Christians who claim to be God’s sons is in reality to reject God.

In John, the reader is presented with uniqueness of Jesus in the opening section of this Gospel (1:1-18). Jesus is presented as one who has his origin in God, is sent by God, and brings the truth about God; he is one in whom the glory of God is seen. The rest of the Gospel is illustrative of what John says in these verses. The Gospel explains the relationship of Jesus both to God and to humankind. The story may seem to be about Jesus, but it is really a story about God. It is theology. Yet, it is a story that leaves the reader with an understanding of God as one who can only be known in Jesus as the life-giver and the light-bearer.

The Fourth Gospel makes clear that in the face of this Jesus-centred exegesis of God, people do divide (John 1:10-11). On the one hand, though Jesus came to his own, and they did not receive him. They should have seen his worth (1:11; 4:44), but did not. They belittle his origins (5:18), his miracles (5:18) and even suggest that he is in league with the demoniac (8:48). However, in rejecting Jesus, they reject God, and are strikingly said by Jesus to be ‘of the devil’ (John 8:44). He is their father, his children their society. It is they who are on the outside.

On the other hand, there were those who received him and believed on his name (John 1:12-13). It is they – and they only - who now have the right to call themselves the ‘children of God’. Moreover, they came to receive and believe – not because of their own choice – but because of God’s activity. He drew them to himself by revealing his glory in Jesus. He came to take up residence among his people at close quarters, with the specific aim of showing his glory and revealing his name, his character.

What was the result of this? A group of people are born of God, born from above, born of the Spirit – all of whom say, ‘We have seen his glory’ (John 1:14). This is their shared experience: they see God in Jesus and they see him as a Father. They not only see miracles wrought by Jesus; they see signs in which they see God’s glory and honour. In everything Jesus says and does, they instinctively see the nature of God being unravelled before their gaze. As John records a series of these signs – seven of them – the reader is invited to share in this experience. By the end of the Gospel, once the great sign of the resurrection has taken place to clarify all the other signs, the reader can join the believing community who looks at the ‘lifted up Jesus’ and concur with Thomas’ exclamation: ‘My Lord and my God.’ (20:28).
The readers of this Gospel may well be only too aware that they are despised and dishonoured by many – just like the servant in Isaiah 53. Nevertheless, they are invited in the words of the text to ‘Come and see’ for themselves (as Jesus invited the two disciples 1:35), and to invite others to do the same (as the two disciples did to others 1:46). And this, ultimately, is the message of John to his readers: ‘through these pages, come and see the glory of Jesus’. As they do, they will become aware of the fact that they are not the shameless followers of a shameless Jesus. They are honoured by God as Jesus is honoured by God. As followers of the honoured and glorified Jesus, they are on the journey to be where he is, to reside with all who are loved by the Father as Jesus: If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him (John 12:26); Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. 25 O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them (John 17:24-26). This is a tremendous message for people who were made to feel worthless and unloved.

It would certainly be tempting for believers in the third generation after Pentecost to feel the absence of the presence of Christ in the midst of their trials. The Fourth Gospel, however, stresses two things of huge importance for those who feel the force of that temptation. First, John’s Gospel devotes five chapters (John 13-17) to Jesus’ careful, loving and sensitive preparation of his disciples for his own departure. The Church who were present in the upper room are those who were to pass on this ‘comfort’ to other believers – including Jesus’ own mother. Secondly, no other Gospel gives such extended teaching on the person and work of the Holy Spirit as the one who conveys the truth to believers, and enables them to convey that truth to a world who does not understand sin, righteousness and judgement. The overwhelming emphasis is on the fact that witnessing believers are not on their own. It seems the church in John’s day needed to be reminded of just how much preparation Jesus made for his departure. No other gospel focuses on this.

But even if they are encouraged by this Gospel, what must be their response to their rejection by society? Give up on those who have rejected them? Remain in their own Paraclete ghettos? No. They must bear fruit by bearing witness; only thus can they abide in Jesus as the vine and bear fruit to the glory of God (John 15). The Paraclete will equip them (John 15:26-27). They bear testimony to those inside the church and outside the church. As they speak of the glory they have seen, they will not be so likely to forget it themselves. However, they must remain united in their witness – united around the truth, the name, the glory – around Jesus. This is true unity. They must tell the truth about God, about Jesus, about themselves. Why? Because the truth matters and the truth sanctifies (17:14) – and God wants the world to hear it. The message came through John the Baptist ‘that all might believe’, and this has not changed. To deny the truth to those who have a right to hear it is to dishonour them, to take away from them the respect that must be accorded them. The church must not do so.
The Free Church College shares these concerns of the Gospel of John. For all our faults, we are honoured by our association with Jesus Christ. All of us who teach and learn together - can say ’we have seen his glory’; we know something of that which indwells the cloud (Exodus 33:18). In our studies together, we seek to explore and expound that glory of God which is defined in Jesus Christ and is the ultimate focus of the word of God. That is precisely why we spend so much time in the Scriptures themselves. No student will see the glory without the light of the word of God.

This College seeks to encourage all students to perceive it to be their duty to prepare to share the glory with others, even with those who may at present despise it. We remind one another that we have a God-given right to speak, to shine, to manifest, to share, and to say to the world ‘Come and see’. We aim to ensure that there are people like yourselves who are trained to see the glory, and to tell the world in its deadness and darkness – and believers in their where true life and light lies – in Jesus.