

Editorial: Volume 8

Welcome to volume 8 of *Orientis Aura*. We are aware that this volume is unusual. It offers a kind of ‘meze’ of essays, reflections, reviews and commentary. We have consciously opted for this approach because the multifaceted nature of Macao, Southeast and East Asia requires a variegated approach to the life of faith across the region. The moral, ecclesial, social, and ethical issues the Christians and people of all faiths address are complex and multifaceted. A ‘meze-type’ approach offers a profound way forward, and it is our earnest hope that the material in this volume will whet the appetite for further theological engagements.

Our intentionally pluralistic approach resonates with the gospels. John’s gospel is usually regarded as the last of the four. But it was not always so. Many of our earliest gospel manuscripts placed *John* second, after *Matthew*, with *Luke* third and *Mark* fourth. Leaving aside the ordering of the gospels, what we can say about *John* from the outset is that it consistently enjoyed significant prestige. Saint Ignatius of Antioch (c. 110 CE) quotes it, as does Saint Polycarp around the same time, and Saint Justin (c. 150 CE). Early church fathers, including Irenaeus, Tertullian and Eusebius of Caesarea, all cite it. So, from the time of the very earliest Christians, John’s testimony was already a recognised gospel. *John* was, literally, good news.

Boldly, *John* makes no pretence of being penned by some neutral historian or biographer. John personally writes to us to say that “these things are written that you may believe Jesus is the Christ and may have life in his name” (20: 31), so readers are left in no doubt as to the purpose *John* has. This gospel aims to strengthen the faith of believers and enable them to grow. It was Origen of Alexandria (c. 185-253), the early church father, who described the gospels as “flowers of the Spirit”. But he singled out *John* as the “flower of the gospels”.

Chapter 1: 1-18 is probably the most crucial doctrinal statement in the New Testament, with *John’s Prologue* depicting the invisible God who is “made known” in Jesus Christ. Only Jesus gives us a glimpse into the inner life of God, and *John* boldly declares that Christ is “the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known” (1: 18). Furthermore, that this was “in the beginning” – not during or after creation first comes into being. Before the heavens and earth, creation and the universe, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit *are*.

John gives us a vivid, intimate image of the completeness of the oneness of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. “In the bosom” – the Greek word is *kolpon* – is not semi-detached, but fully part of the Godhead. Just a few centuries later, the early church fathers would speak of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as being

consubstantial and coeternal. The Word of God is fully enfleshed in Christ, which is why Jesus can claim that “I and the Father are one” (10: 30). Later, Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit as a person, the “counsellor” who is the “Spirit of truth” (14: 16-17, 15: 26, 16: 13). Through receiving the person of Christ and the person of the Holy Spirit, we ourselves become new persons.

There is another sense in which one can understand the Greek word *kolpon*. It can also mean a ‘bay’ or even a ‘creek’. Here, we might speak analogically of Jesus as the place (or person) of mooring, now the way into the far country of God. What lies beyond our being secured in Christ is an expanse that can never be fully known, for it is without limit. Nonetheless, Jesus begins our journey into God.

That’s why *John* proclaims of Jesus, “He has made him known” (1: 18). To know Jesus is to know God; they are one. This would have been a scandal to the mindset of the first and second centuries. The idea that the invisible, unknown God could be fully known in a living person – “the Word made flesh...” – was utterly alien. The Greek word ‘dwelt’ literally means “pitched his tent amongst” (1; 14).

John urges us to accept the gift of God which is in Christ, and the truth, transformation, and salvation it brings. And *John* also urges us to *desire* this. Thus, when John speaks about “knowing” and “believing” the things he writes about Jesus, the terms are often used interchangeably. Yet “knowing” is not some kind of mere intellectual assent. It is, instead, a yielding and surrendering to something we can never fully grasp, which requires faith and trust. And it is this knowing and believing that turn us back to the gospel’s testimony regarding Jesus.

The mystery of the incarnation has a witness in the *Prologue*, in the form of John the Baptist. His role is to “bear witness to the light” (1: 7), and this probably amounts to the most economical summary of what being a Christian disciple is. Although we only have the shortest summaries of John the Baptist’s message, we can be in no doubt that “bearing witness” is a costly and challenging ministry. It will marginalise John, see him go to jail, and it will ultimately bring about his death.

The *Gospel of John* is clear that John the Baptist is not the main attraction (1: 8). But nor is he some mere warm-up act. It is more than that. John the Baptist has an integral role in bearing witness to Christ as light. But he also serves as our exemplar. John the Baptist prays one of the most economical prayers followers of Christ can ever utter: “He must increase – and I must decrease” (3: 30). Few will ever dare to pray those seven words.

When running a theological college at Oxford (Cuddesdon), I used to explain to the students being educated and formed for ordained ministry that they had no job or profession to look forward to once the bishop had laid hands on their

heads. Instead, they were now preparing for another life, referred to by a somewhat older English term. They were about to enter an 'occupation'. We need our clergy to be occupied with God, as fully as possible.

And then we also want our ministers to be occupied with all the people, places, pains and pleasures that have been laid on their hearts through prayer and by the Holy Spirit and given by God into their care. We want our ministers to dwell amongst us, care for and love the people and places around us, as Christ himself did.

Yet Christ goes further. Jesus is, uniquely, *fully* occupied by God and so abundantly overflows with the grace and power of the Holy Spirit. And by choosing to occupy our world in his life, death and resurrection for a given time, he now invites us to occupy his home, and to be for eternity.

This helps explain Jesus' baptism being mentioned here, which is otherwise barely narrated in *John*. What the gospel seeks to establish at this juncture is that Jesus has entered fully into our world, participating in all that we do – rituals, meals, journeys, conversations, grief, loss, joy, and celebration. In Jesus' death, and by the shedding of his blood, God redeems his people. But this can only be done by Jesus becoming one of us. The Word made flesh dwelt amongst us, full of grace and truth, and like a lamb without blemish. Yet it still means that for Jesus to be the victor, he must first of all become the victim.

The calling of the first disciples (1 35-42), and then Philip and Nathaniel (1 43-51), is far from comfortable for the churches. True, the call to discipleship can sometimes be about remaining where we are, offering us the benefit of some stability and continuity. But more usually, the call to discipleship is actively disruptive. Responding to the call requires upheaval, a change of plans, place and pace. We are now asked to move *faster* towards the encounters God has planned. We are pressed to move towards where the people are. Likewise, the church must go to the people. It cannot just wait for people to come. This is why Jesus finds people before they look for him. He is not only the sought, but also the seeker.

Several years ago, at an interview for a senior post in the Church of England, a member of the panel asked me, if appointed to the role, "What are you going to do to get more bums on the pews?". I confess that I replied instinctively, and before I could really think, said that "I think you'll find the purpose of the church is to get the bums off the pews". I added that, "Christianity is a Monday to Saturday business, and Sunday is set aside for refreshment and worship". I was not offered the job.

John gives us a powerful indication of what the call to discipleship consists of. It is about recognising Jesus' voice in the first place, actively seeking to spend time with him (i.e., in his presence apart from distractions – 1: 37-39, 46, etc), and then *learning* from him. Learning *is* discipleship. The first disciples were taught, tutored, mentored, formed and educated by Jesus. It was a long apprenticeship that lasted about three years. It involved unlearning what they thought they knew and having their worldviews turned upside down and inside out.

Discipleship is an education that confounds us and calls us, demolishes us and builds us up, confirms and changes us, and eventually transforms the taught into teachers. Philip, Nathaniel and the others have now had their first full day at this new mobile school of discipleship. So, "come and see" (1: 39) for yourself. And in grazing on the essays in this volume, be prepared to be educated.