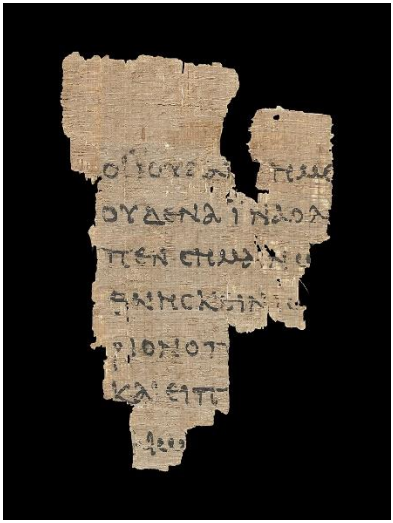
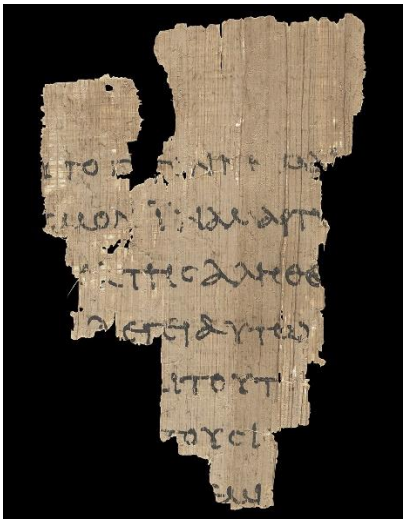
ST MARYS
NANTWICH

Lent Course 2026

The Gospel according to St John

Week 1





from the February magazine:

Have you ever had to empty one of your bins and search through the rubbish? Not a pleasant task, but in 1934 it was the daily work of 25 year old Colin Roberts. Not in his own back yard, but in the bowels of the John Rylands Library, Manchester, with the contents of excavated dumps of ancient Egyptian cities.

(Incidentally, did you know that 200 items from the Parochial Library of St Mary's Nantwich are archived there, including, most significantly, Wynkyn de Worde's 1502 Sarum Hymnal, *Expositio Hymnorum*, one of only three known copies?)

Roberts had been tasked with cataloguing a collection of papyri, still unexamined decades after being unearthed. Sifting through mostly mundane accounts and trade documents, it was painstaking work. Until one day a fragment smaller than his hand caught his eye.

He read the Greek text on each side and immediately recognised phrases from St John's account of the trial of Christ, including the word "truth", from Jesus' saying "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth".

From the style of handwriting, Roberts could date the manuscript to the reign of Emperor Hadrian early in the 2nd century. There and then, he knew that he held in his hands the oldest known copy of any part of the New Testament. It remains so today, known as the P52 fragment, on permanent display in its own case in the library.

At the time, the prevailing view among biblical scholars was that John's Gospel was written late in the 2nd century, long after any living memory of Jesus, by someone giving free rein to their imagination in a work of historical fiction. Why else was it so different to the other gospels?

Roberts' finding caused a return to the long held view that the Fourth Gospel dates from late in the 1st century, the work of an eyewitness, but after longer and deeper reflection on the events. As the saying goes, life is lived forward, but understood backwards. Or as Robert Browning put it in his poem *A death in the desert*, which imagines the last hours of St John's life, "what first were guessed as points I now knew stars".

St John in his maturity, gathering the fragments of his memory, finds them opening up to reveal new and universal depths of truth. "What is truth?" Pilate replied. John's Gospel gives us the answer.

Mark Hart

Some general notes:

- Look at the tapestry cushions of the 4 Gospels in St Mary's. Where is John? How is it distinctive?
- John has long had a special place. Matthew, Mark, and Luke – the "synoptics" – same view. Not all the same view, but they look that way in comparison with John
- Clement of Alexandria, 200AD: "last of all, John, seeing that the physical facts had been made clear in the Gospel [of Mark], urged by his friends and inspired by the Spirit, put together a spiritual gospel."
- What comes to mind if John's gospel mentioned? The big picture? Love, the world, the Word, the Spirit, "I am" sayings, signs, life, light, believing?
- John has both a bigger range of view, and a greater depth
- Yet the language is simple, non-technical, small vocabulary, short sentences – readable at many levels
- The most difficult gospel to understand fully, yet, as Augustine said (4th century), it's a book in which a child may paddle and an elephant may swim
- Written with clear purpose – "But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." John 20.31. Most commonly used gospel in evangelism.

- Jesus sounds very different from the Jesus of the other gospels. There, we have much enigmatic self-reference as “son of man”, cautious about revealing more. In John, Jesus speaks at length about his identity as the Son of the Father, the one come from heaven, and returning to heaven.
- Long, intricate discourses in John, unlike the short, direct sayings of the sermon on the mount, and no narrative parables
- Widely considered to be the last gospel written – after a longer period of reflection
- Question has been raised – how much is it historical? How much imaginative reflection? More historical than scholars used to think – and more on that in future weeks
- But note from the fragment – all capital letters, no punctuation. How can you read it?
- Remember – we don’t really know, in many places, where the words of Jesus end, and the words of the evangelist begin
- But does that matter, if it’s all the work of the Spirit?
- Structure: At the beginning of ch 12 we’re on the day before Palm Sunday, that’s almost exactly half way – emphasis on the Passion and Resurrection – as with the other gospels.

- Sometimes the two halves are called the Book of Signs, and the Book of Glory. Why glory? We'll come to that.
- Signs – note the seven as you read, starting with the wedding at Cana; Eight if you include the resurrection, or the post-resurrection miracle of the draught of fishes (ch 21)
- "I am" sayings – 7 metaphorical "I am the bread of life" etc., but note also where Jesus simply says "I am" in various places (often translated as "I am he") – a reference to the divine name (Exodus 3)
- The Gospel has a Prologue (1.1-18). And it has an Epilogue (ch 21), thought to have been added later – the end of ch 20 reads like the end of the Gospel. And there's an insertion (8.1-11) – note that John wasn't written as a whole in this form we now have it, from the start.
- We'll read the NIV (copies of the gospel are cheap and available) but it sometimes does too much of its own interpretation, and is too much of a paraphrase.

Some of the Questions in John

Chapters 1-4

Who are you?

What are you looking for?

Where are you staying?

What sign can you show?

How can anyone be born after having grown old?

Where did you get that living water?

Thoughts and questions for us:

- The Prologue (1.1-18) is like a summary as well as an introduction. What does it say about where Jesus stays/abides?
- Compare 1.18 with 13.23, 21.24. Where is this gospel leading us to abide?
- Compare 1.14 with 20.28 (the original ending)
- How are the above questions answered in the text?
- Can any of the above questions be asked of us / by us? How may they be answered? How does this gospel help us to answer them?
- What is different about the answers found here compared with the answers given in society at large?
- What felt new and refreshing as you heard these chapters?
- What questions or difficulties were raised?
- What key themes are coming through?