ST MARYS
NANTWICH

Lent Course 2026

The Gospel according to St John

Week 3

Binary Oppositions in John

One of the characteristics of John's Gospel is the repeated sharp opposition of positives and negatives:

Positive	Negative	References
Light	Darkness	1.4-5 etc.
Spirit	Flesh	3.6; 6.63
Life	Condemnation/Wrath/ Death	3.16,36; 5.24,29
Belief	Unbelief	3.18 etc.
Heavenly, From Above	Earthly, From Below	3.31 etc.
True	False	7.18; 8.44
Those who have done Good	Those who have done Evil	5.29
Love	Hate	7.7; 12.25; 14.15-28; 15.18; 15.23
Freedom	Slavery	8.32-36
Not of this World	Of this World	8.23 etc.
Sight	Blindness	9.39

- To understand this, remember the purpose of the book (20.31) – that you (the reader) may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.
- The list of positives is wholly attractive and compelling; the negatives are wholly undesirable. And there's no middle ground.
- The dualism is a key rhetorical device in the Gospel to impress upon the reader the need to make a decision.
- The Gospel is also written against a background of growing opposition from within Judaism. The earliest Christians would meet in synagogues, and were a group within Judaism. Now a sharp division was appearing.
- Christians were being expelled from synagogues (note the references in the Gospel). The "benediction of the heretics" was being introduced into Jewish daily prayer, where every morning you thank God that you're not a heretic, which includes not being a Christian.
- The Gospel's dualism therefore helps to give clear identity to the Christian community and to reinforce belief when some may turn back (see 6.66, and ch. 8 where those who had believed in Jesus turn against him).

⚠ Danger! Read with Care ⚠

- This gives us an example of the care needed in reading the Bible.
- John's Gospel is polemical, written to move people, to build faith and to encourage a beleaguered community.
- By defining sharply those who believe, it necessarily identifies those who do not believe – others, those outside the community.
- The danger is that the text is used against those "others"

- For example, when Christianity became the dominant religion of the empire, some of the texts in John were used to justify exclusion and violence against “pagans” and “infidels”.
- Some have taken texts from John and claimed to know the eternal destiny (lost) of all who die as unbelievers – whether Muslims, babies, those without the mental capacity to believe etc.
- This is a travesty of the Gospel, taking isolated texts as if they were propositional truths (like 2+2=4), and missing the big picture of God’s love for the whole world.

A Particular Caution

- “the Jews” are mentioned 5 or 6 times each in Matthew, Mark and Luke, and about 70 times in John.
- We read repeatedly of “fear of the Jews”.
- The Jews feature strongly in the Passion narrative, calling for the death of Jesus.
- Jesus says to the Jews, “You are from your father, the devil… he is a liar and the father of lies” (8.44)
- Throughout the long history of antisemitism in the Church, these verses have been used as justification for it.
- The Nazis and others have used 8.44 to demonise Jews as “children of the devil”.
- Martin Luther, later in his life, became virulently anti-Semitic, writing a treatise entitled “On the Jews and their lies”.
- But Jesus was a Jew, and all his disciples in the Gospel.
- Jesus said “salvation is from the Jews” 4.22
- In many cases (not all) the term “Jews” means “Judeans”, people from the south.
- Take care reading the Bible!

Some of the Questions in John

Chapters 8-11

Has no-one condemned you? (8.10)

Who are you? (8.25)

Do you believe? (9.35)

Do you believe this? (11.26)

What are we to do? (11.47)

Questions for us:

- Work through the above questions and look at the context. Can we hear them being asked by us now, or asked of us now? How can they be answered? Are any answers found in the text?
- What have you found fresh, inspiring, or encouraging in these chapters?
- What have you found difficult or disturbing?
- "What are you looking for?" – a theme that runs through the Gospel. How do these chapters point to answers?