

Northolt Park Baptist Church

John 20:30-31: Seeing Jesus

John 12 records that some Greeks who were going to Jerusalem to worship came to one of Jesus' disciples with a request: 'Sir', they said, 'we would like to see Jesus' (12:21). In this series, we will be looking at some passages in John's gospel under the overall title of 'Seeing Jesus'. We're coming to John, and saying 'Sir, we would like to see Jesus'.

Jesus is the most important, the most extraordinary, the most controversial, and the most widely considered person in the whole of history. More paintings have been painted about him than anyone else; more books have been written about him than anyone else. So significant is he, that we break history around him: we talk about events BC (before Christ) and events AD (*Anno Domini*, in the year of our Lord).

He's always had a place in popular culture too, whether in musicals like Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Jesus Christ Superstar*, movies like Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, or books like Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. More than 100 movies have been made about Jesus. Many will have heard of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. You might not be so familiar with the Canadian Kung-Fu horror comedy musical called *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter!* Pamela Anderson allegedly started a recent trend among Hollywood celebrities by wearing a T-shirt with 'Jesus is my homeboy' on it (a homeboy being someone in my neighbourhood, my gang). Jesus has become a fashion item, cool and hip in a trendy sort of way. All this shows there is a fascination with Jesus, that he's not simply a figure from the past but continues to effect people today.

We're sometimes told that religions and cults all believe essentially the same things, but they *don't* all believe the same about Jesus. For the Buddhist, Jesus is an enlightened man; for the Muslim, Jesus is a prophet; for the Jehovah's Witness, Jesus is a created being; for the new ager, Jesus is a state of consciousness that we

can all aspire too... and no, I'm not quite sure what is meant by that!

All of this raises a crucial question – *who is Jesus?* Somehow, people will not give up the search for an answer to this question. And every year, normally around Christmas or Easter, some new theory about Jesus is put out by someone somewhere: Jesus the communist; Jesus the feminist; Jesus the Galilean peasant; Jesus the revolutionary; Jesus the Freemason; Jesus the man, married to Mary Magdalene, who had three children (a girl and two boys – just in case you were wondering...), who divorced, and then married again.

Christians sometimes get nervous about these theories. But they needn't do so. It's telling that all these Jesuses come and go as quickly as John Allegro's claim in 1970 that the name 'Jesus' was a symbol for a sacred hallucinogenic mushroom cult around which Christianity first arose. And if you've never heard of John Allegro, or Jesus being a mushroom, that only proves the point!

It has been famously said that when scholars investigated who Jesus was, trying to get back to the *real* Jesus, they looked down the long well of history and saw their own faces reflected in the water at the bottom; they had created Jesus in their own image. So, it's now no huge surprise to us that someone working in the late 1960s decided Jesus was a code-name for getting high on hallucinogenic mushrooms. And it shouldn't really be a surprise that the Jesus of *The Da Vinci Code* is an ordinary man, a spiritual teacher, who encouraged his followers to find the divine light inside themselves. That's what a lot of people in our generation want to hear – that Jesus is a great therapist who encourages us to be authentic and follow our heart.

Still, all these theories do address that all-important question – *who is Jesus?* And we might need to ask what kind of Jesus we

create: middle-class Jesus? gentle Jesus, meek and mild? white Jesus? wouldn't-say-boo-to-a-goose Jesus? We too need to know who Jesus *is* – not how we *imagine* him to be, not how the church *would like* him to be, but how he really *is*. And John's gospel offers an excellent beginning for such a quest, because it provides a focus on Jesus, it helps us to *see* Jesus, and that's a good reason for looking at it.

So, we want to take a fresh look at *Jesus*, particularly as he is portrayed in the gospel of John. In fact, *our concern to look at Jesus is close to John's own expressed concern*. Towards the end of his gospel, in 20:30-31, John self-consciously and explicitly tells us *why* he has written – 'Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing, you may have life in his name' (NIV). There are three things to notice about John's purpose from these verses.

1. His selection of signs

Jesus' miracles are called 'signs' in this gospel (2:11; 4:54; 6:2, 14, 26; 9:16; 11:47; 12:18). John tells us that many signs have not been included. He was selective. And he's had to be – for if all the things Jesus said and did were written down, the whole world wouldn't be big enough to hold the books (21:25)!

John has selected and edited his eyewitness material for the benefit of his readers. This is reliable material, but it's not an exhaustive account, since there was a lot more that could have been included. It's important to note that the fact he has been selective does not necessarily mean he is not truthful in what he records. There are things that John records that the other gospels don't, and vice versa, because they're each working with a specific purpose, and they select material about Jesus on the basis of that purpose.

The word 'sign' appears 17 times in John, most of the time referring to Jesus' miracles. But a sign doesn't have to be a miracle. In fact, it's worth saying that the NIV has taken a slight liberty in 20:30. It says 'miraculous signs', but the word 'miraculous' isn't present in the

original text; it reads simply 'signs'. So, it may well be that John's signs include not only the miraculous events, but possibly other acts as well – like the cleansing of the temple (2:12-25), or the entry into Jerusalem on a donkey (12:12-19) – which are also *significant* for our understanding of Jesus. But the NIV inserts the word 'miraculous' because most of the time Jesus' signs are miracles, and it's those passages that we will be looking at in these studies.

So, John chose signs that would serve his purpose; he has been guided in his selection of signs by his desire to take just those that are suitable to his aim. He sees Jesus' miracles as signs pointing to his identity, and they are designed to bring about faith in him. Which leads to the second point.

2. His focus on Jesus

This brings us to the heart of our concern for this series, and it reflects John's own concern. The signs are *sign-ificant* because of what they say about Jesus. It's sometimes pointed out that in 20:31 the sentence stresses the word 'Jesus'. We might say, 'These things are written to show that the Christ, whom you are expecting, is Jesus. Do you want to know who God's Son is? It is Jesus'. John isn't saying that the disciples were confronted with Jesus and tried to find categories for him; he is saying that they were looking for a Messiah, and discovered it was Jesus. The Messiah, the Son of God is Jesus!

'Messiah' (or Christ) and 'Son of God' are important concepts for John. At the time of Jesus, there was a whole range of expectations about what kind of messiah would come. Some expected a *royal* messiah, like King David; others expected a *priestly* messiah, like Melchizedek; others expected a *prophetic* figure, like Moses; still others expected a *heavenly* figure, like the Son of Man described in Daniel chapter 7. The hope was varied. So John is careful to let the story of Jesus define what sort of messiah he is. Since it was Jews who were interested in the Messiah, this suggests the book's original audience was probably Jewish. It also means that when we look at the signs in the gospel we might expect

Old Testament stories and themes to figure strongly.

Likewise with Jesus as the Son of God. One of the most important things that should be said about the title 'Son of God' is that it could simply be another way of referring to the Messiah. In the Old Testament, for instance, the king is sometimes referred to as the 'Son of God' (e.g. Psalm 2:7; 2 Samuel 7:14), and so when Jews looked forward to the coming king, the Messiah, they sometimes referred to him as the 'Son of God'. But in John, it seems fairly clear that something more is going on. The language of 'sonship' is used repeatedly to refer to the *special relationship* Jesus has with the Father. And it's underlined by Jesus being designated as 'God's one and only Son', or 'the unique Son' (1:18; 3:16). The Father has given all things to the Son (3:35), and the Son depends on the Father (5:19). All that the Son does he does in harmony with the Father. They are one, as Jesus' prays in chapter 17.

3. His encouragement to believe

John writes so that we might *believe* in Jesus. It should be said that there's a slight discrepancy in the wording in 20:31. Some manuscripts of the gospel have a verb which would be translated 'may come to believe' – which would suggest that John wrote with an *evangelistic* purpose in mind, to encourage people to *come to faith*. Others have a verb which would be translated 'may go on believing', which would imply that he wrote to Christians to *strengthen* their faith. So, did John write to encourage Christians to *keep on* in their faith, or did he write with an evangelistic aim, to encourage people to *come to faith*? In fact, we have to ask whether it really makes any difference! Either way, it's clear that *John wanted to encourage faith in Jesus*. If a person is not a Christian, it may well be that John provides a way of persuading that person to come to faith in Jesus; and for those who are Christians, as they see Jesus through the pages of John's gospel, they will also find their faith to be reaffirmed and strengthened, that they are encouraged to go on believing in Jesus.

But it's clear that the *signs* play an important role in John's purpose of persuading people to believe. John wants his readers to 'see' the signs that Jesus performed, and believe, and receive life. That's why the immediate context of these verses is so important. It concerns Thomas and a conversation about *sight* and *faith*. 'Do you *believe* because you have *seen* me?' says Jesus, and then pronounces a blessing on those who have *not* seen and yet *still* believe (20:29). John, through his gospel, provides a way for people to 'see' Jesus. That's why he writes – that on the basis of the signs recorded, his readers may 'see' and believe that the life-giving Christ and Son of God is none other than Jesus... that people will see not with the eyes in their *head*, but with the eyes of the *heart*.

John also speaks about 'seeing' Jesus on the very first page of the gospel, in chapter 1. He tells us in 1:18 that 'no-one has seen God' – God is *invisible* – but he is also *knowable*, for 'the one and only Son has made him known'. 'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we saw his glory,' says John (1:14). If you want to know what God is like, says John, look at Jesus. He became flesh and lived among us; he made God known. 'Anyone who has seen me,' said Jesus, 'has seen the Father' (14:9). See God in Jesus turning water into wine. See God in Jesus healing broken bodies. See God in Jesus breaking bread and feeding the thousands. See God in Jesus opening blind eyes. But not just in the miraculous; in the mundane things too. See God in Jesus cooking fish for his followers on a fire. See God in Jesus talking in the evening to a Jewish leader. See God in Jesus speaking by a well to a woman shunned by society. See God in Jesus dying for men and women. See God in Jesus drawing us into a relationship with himself.

I trust that our time spent in John's gospel will be profitable and precious to all of us, a time when each of us will see Jesus for ourselves, and will believe. Amen.

Notes from a sermon preached by Antony Billington at Northolt Park Baptist Church on 7 January 2007