

The Good News According to John - 11th July 2021

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 0 0] Ciao a tutti, belle verdeti. Figured a bit of Italian would help hedge our bets for the match at Wembley tonight.

How we doing? My name's Matt, the vigorous St John's. It's quite the week at this end, I can tell you. Although we'll soon know whether it's a case of all roads lead to Rome or football's coming home.

My head says Italy, my heart says England. But whatever the outcome, it's been great to see such generosity, humility and integrity in the way Gareth Southgate has led his team.

Top man. And there's much to celebrate, whatever the result later. Appreciate not everyone's feverish about the football or even wild about Wimbledon.

But the sport in summer so far has at least provided a bit of light relief from the complications of COVID. Indeed, we're awaiting confirmation of the government's plan announced early last week to lift pretty much all restrictions from the 19th.

[1 : 0 3] Time will tell if the government's approach is the right one or not. But this imminent change puts a lot on our shoulders both individually and as a community as we now need to balance the benefits with the risks going forward.

And so for us at St. John's, the PCC, the trustees of the church, have come up with a plan for the summer. And I'll be writing to all church members this week with what it will look like in more detail.

But I guess the headline is that yes, our church building will be open once again, all being well, from Sunday the 25th of July. Which is good news, but in doing so we're going to be taking things slowly and understandably cautiously.

The plan from the 25th of July and throughout August therefore is to alternate weekly Sunday morning and evening gatherings. Mornings for a start will be purely social, not services, but more a chance for those who wish to gather and meet together.

We've been closed for in-person stuff for so long, some 16 months. So we need to find our stride in simply relating again, but also weigh up numbers and see how people feel about being together as that will shape what's possible and preferable for our worship going forward.

[2 : 2 5] So all being well, we'll be open from 10am on Sundays 25th of July, 8th and 22nd of August. There'll be refreshments available.

If the weather's good, we'll prioritise being outside and in the park too. Maybe folks can bring a picnic lunch and hang around. This fellowship is part of our expression of worship and gratitude to God.

But then on alternate Sunday evenings, so the 1st, 15th and 29th of August, the plan is to hold a 6pm evening service of sorts.

Space to pray, to share, some music, maybe singing if we feel comfortable, but perhaps above all to be present with God alongside each other.

Having said all this though, I'm acutely aware that while some are raring to go, others of us are considerably more cautious. And whilst a rapidly increasing infection rate is not currently leading to the level of hospitalisations and deaths of before, our duty of care, my duty of care, means we need to strike the right balance between risk and reward.

[3 : 35] Distancing, masks, looks like they'll be our own choice, but having come this far, let's stay sensible, please. Indeed it's an intentionally staggered start before, hopefully a more regular 10am and 6pm Sunday pattern emerges from September, but let's remain vigilant with testing, and of course if we're displaying any symptoms, do please stay at home.

We'll be very mindful of local developments and national guidance, and overall, I think we'll all need patience, flexibility, a bit of grace, as we tentatively work things out together.

As I say though, I'll be in touch by letter this week with all church members, but if you're not on our database and would like to know more, do please just drop us an email and we'll happily include you in that mail out.

Now, all this does mean though, that next week will be the last of these particular YouTube sessions for the time being. My focus needs to shift a bit for this summer season, but do please keep subscribed to this channel, as this online presence is a legit and important part of what it means for us to be church.

So we'll be working out what that online and in-person mix looks like from September and beyond. And so God, would you help us as we move forward to know your wisdom and guidance, please.

[5 : 04] There's a lot for us to consider, a lot to balance between our social, spiritual, emotional well-being, and being mindful of those who are vulnerable or anxious.

So guide us, we pray. Indeed, thank you for Nigel and Marg, our church wardens, for Roof, our curate, for our PCC, for our church, our wider community, those of us here online.

We want to be together with you, God. So help us to approach these coming weeks and beyond in as sensible, safe and sensitive way as possible. And speak to us now as we tuck into this latest Sunday session.

May it be a little time of tranquility to keep us grounded and going for it with you, we pray. Thank you, God. Amen. Amen. Well, before a final Sunday session for now and next time, we're going to round off the recent series we've been doing and look today at the last of the four gospel accounts of Jesus' life.

The gospel, the good news, according to John. Who was John? Well, there's centuries of debate on this. I think on balance, my gut goes with John being the John who was one of Jesus' 12 disciples.

[6 : 28] Traditionally the youngest of the 12 and therefore someone who had decades after Jesus to piece his gospel together. But there's no reason why John's gospel couldn't have been polished up by those who John himself ended up mentoring in later life.

So perhaps the gospel is John's material and a reflection of John's faith, but maybe edited and finalised by those who John oversaw in the church he led in his latter years.

And yet aside from this authorship debate, we've seen so far with Mark, Matthew and Luke that whilst there are contrasts in their priorities, there was also a fair bit of crossover between these other three gospel writers.

And yet John's account, well, it sticks out as just a bit different. In some ways, for the JG of John's gospel, perhaps you want to think Jack Grealish, you know, the one who's a bit more of a maverick, offering something creative, something unique perhaps in comparison with those around him.

Just like Grealish, John perhaps isn't the gospel we'd go to every time, but there's nevertheless something pretty special about it. Indeed, from the very start of John's account, we can quickly tell that it's written in a different style.

[7 : 49] We're on a different level almost than we get with either Matthew, Mark or Luke. So whilst the other gospels might focus on the practical details of Jesus' family history, his birth, his message of good news for the poor, his parables and preaching the kingdom of God and so on, in contrast, John scales the heights.

He gives us an elevated, even cosmic view of who Jesus really is. In fact, John uses the word cosmos nearly 80 times in his gospel.

John is clearly thinking of the bigger picture. For example, whereas in, say, the start of Genesis we read, in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

John, well, John sees that Genesis start, but raises the stakes by going back even further, highlighting the existence of Jesus, the one he calls the word, as being even before any initial act of creation took place.

And so John starts his gospel like this. In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God.

[9 : 07] He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made. Without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light for all people.

The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not overcome it. Now it's beautifully, bewitchingly poetic, you know, presenting reality almost as a riddle to be wrestled with.

And yet in these opening few sentences, John is also setting the scene, introducing the themes which his whole gospel will build on. So he talks of light and life as the essence of being.

Indeed, the words light and life appear twice as often in John's gospel as they do in Matthew, Mark and Luke put together. He tells us Jesus, the word, was God, with God, in the beginning.

For John, Jesus is divine, the one who is fully God. He says that this word has made all things a living, creating, communicating presence, the one through whom everything flows.

[10 : 25] But he also acknowledges darkness, darkness which can never overcome the light, but also darkness which is incapable of comprehending, incapable of grasping the wonder of who the light of life really is.

It's the biggest of picture stuff, designed to leave us awestruck at what comes next, because John tells us that this same cosmic being has now come into the world.

The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. The physical and the spiritual are fused together in Jesus, and now we, says John, channelling his inner Chesney Hawks, he says, we have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only.

Now, what's interesting with John is that another of his themes is this idea of recognising the presence, the glory of God through Jesus as he dwells in our midst.

Indeed, this word dwell is a significant one as John uses it to intentionally record a way in which God was said to dwell with the people of Israel way back in their wilderness wanderings.

[11 : 43] In those days, God's presence dwelt in a tent. Not as daft a concept as perhaps you might think, since these people were a travelling community themselves, but it was a tent, a tabernacle, in which the glory of God was said to reside.

John, therefore, puts this same idea together with Jesus, the one, he says, who has come to dwell, to tabernacle, to literally pitch his tent among us.

It's almost like Jesus has travelled through space and time to now reside and abide with us. Yes, he's come as a human, but he's also carrying with him the whole cosmos in his character.

I don't know about you, but I think I could probably do with remembering and acknowledging this cosmic glory, this wonder in Jesus. a bit more often. I love the earthly Jesus, the relatable, relational guy, you know, the one who's my friend, the one who, as we've been saying, takes the everyday stuff of life and makes it spiritual, the one who gets down in the dirt with those in need.

I love that side of Jesus. But sometimes, I perhaps neglect the heavenly Jesus, the creator of the universe, the one whose voice puts stars into space, the one who's my Lord as well as my friend.

[13 : 16] You know, the writer and Franciscan friar Richard Rohr makes this distinction by talking of Jesus of Nazareth on the one hand and the cosmic Christ on the other.

They're one and the same, but Richard Rohr helpfully reminds us that in saying Jesus Christ, we're able to acknowledge both aspects, the personal name, Jesus, and the universal title, Christ, the anointed one as well.

Indeed, John, in his gospel, reflects this holistic understanding at the end of his introduction in chapter one, saying this, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

And so I wonder for you, as it may well be for me, perhaps using Jesus Christ in our prayers, our meditations, may just lead us into that deeper grace, that deeper truth of God in our lives, a deeper faith to know that when we say Jesus has got our lives, got our situations safely in his hands, so too we're also at the same time being carried not simply by Jesus, but by the cosmic Christ.

And that truth, that grace, well that might just give us as profound a sense of peace as it's possible for us to perceive. Now, what's interesting in light of this is to consider the way in which John conveys this grace and truth as his gospel progresses?

[14 : 55] For example, John famously includes seven particular sayings Jesus uses of himself, saying, I am the bread of life, I am the light of the world, I am the gate for the sheep, I am the good shepherd, I am the resurrection and the life, I am the way, the truth and the life, I am the true vine.

Now, John knows these aren't just random phrases from Jesus, though, no, for a start, in saying, I am each time, Jesus is claiming the name of God from of old for himself since, I am, is the name God responds with when Moses asks who has appeared to him in the burning bush.

Indeed, Jesus says, I am, some 35 different times in John's gospel. Those hearing him say it at the time may not always clock it, but John wants us as his readers to realise that Jesus is right to claim this divine identity for himself.

What's more though, each of these seven particular I am sayings, well, they're rooted in the deep history of the way in which God relates to us.

So, on the one hand, just as we see God described, for example, as a shepherd throughout the scriptures. You know, the Lord's my shepherd and all that. So here, Jesus is saying, I am that same shepherd.

[16 : 25] You know, Psalm 23 is written about me. I, Jesus, will lead you beside quiet waters. I will restore your soul. But then, on the other hand, we also see the people of God described in certain ways throughout the scriptures.

perhaps most notably as being like a vineyard which God cares for so that our lives might bear good fruit. And so, when Jesus says, actually, I am the true vine, it's his way of identifying with us in this fruit-bearing capacity, saying, look, stick with me, remain in me, and you'll be able to produce this bumper harvest of goodness.

And so, by referring to both God and us, these I am statements reveal between them, again, the grace and truth of Jesus Christ being both the God of the cosmos, but also the God who is with us in the flesh, the one who is both human and divine.

What else? Well, alongside these seven I am's, John is also very selective in choosing to tell us about just seven of Jesus' miracles.

Unlike Dele Sol, seven is the magic number for John, an historically holy number of cosmic completion, if you like. But more than just miracles, John makes a point of calling them signs, pointers to a deeper, bigger reality.

[18 : 04] That's why, for example, John starts with a miracle like Jesus turning water into wine at a wedding in Cana. On the surface, it's a pretty cool miracle and one of my personal favourites, I can tell you, but beyond the miraculous Merlot, John calls it a sign because it's an act which points again to a deeper grace and truth.

What might that be? Well, Jesus Christ has come to show us what the abundant joyful life of God looks like. This life doesn't mean jars holding water should be used to try and make sure we're richly washed and therefore purified before God as these vessels at the wedding at Cana would have been used for.

Nah, Jesus flips that around because Jesus Christ is all about invitation and inclusion, about abundant wine, not ritual water, water, of ensuring that we know God is for us, not looking for reasons to be against us.

Equally, just as this sign of water into wine had a deeper meaning, so too do the other miracles John chooses to include as well. So, Jesus feeding the 5,000 from a few bread and fish, yes, on the surface it's another cool miracle, but as a sign, it points both back to the way God provided for the Israelites in the wilderness with manna, you know, bread from heaven, but it also points forward to the way Jesus would provide for the whole world by giving the bread of his life through his death and resurrection.

You know, it's interesting, John doesn't record Jesus giving out bread and wine at the last supper, that doesn't appear in John's gospel, but in a way it doesn't matter, because the feeding of the 5,000 seems to be John's alternative choice of sign for the communion we can have with God through Jesus, the one who soon after this feeding says of himself, I am the bread of life, you know, feed on me, which is what communion is all about.

[20 : 21] So, water into wine, feeding of the 5,000, what are the other miracles John includes? Well, elsewhere in John, Jesus heals an official's son without even needing to visit him in person.

He heals a lame man who had instead placed his hope in a superstitious belief about the waters of the pool of Bethesda. Jesus walks on water, overcoming the threat and upheaval of the storms of the night.

He restores the sight of a man born blind, enabling him to see in more ways than one. And then, perhaps most impressively, Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, again, as a sign of his ultimate authority over death itself.

Seven miracles as signs, signs for John which point to a deeper truth and grace. God's of your testimony.

Your pointers to God's glory, to God's spirit dwelling with you. God. We've talked before about the idea of an interventionist God.

[21 : 42] For me, at least, that doesn't seem to sit comfortably as a way of describing God's involvement in our lives, as if God sometimes intervenes, is sometimes involved, and then sometimes isn't.

I think it's more than that. Rather, I think I prefer a term Dave Tomlinson uses to describe God as being the one who interacts with us. the God who is interactive, not interventionist.

I'd say John's Jesus, John's God, is not interventionist, but interactive, dwelling among us. I wonder, therefore, how you might describe God's interaction with you or with your loved ones over recent times, because I suggest these interactions may well be the signs which God can use to point us and others to that ongoing work of deeper grace and truth in our lives.

Now, if these sayings and signs dominate the opening half of John's gospel, which culminates in Lazarus being raised back to life, the concluding half of John's gospel is dominated by a much more concentrated sequence of events.

Events we've looked at recently, which include Palm Sunday, the Last Supper, Jesus' death, and then his resurrection. But John's intention in sharing these events in the second half of his gospel is clear, is to reveal the glory of God through Jesus' suffering, yes, but ultimately the glory of God through his victorious resurrection.

[23 : 23] Indeed, following Jesus' resurrection, at the end of chapter 20, John seems to draw his gospel to a close with these words. Jesus performed many other 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.

John, it seems, has written his gospel so that you and I might believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the cosmic Christ, a belief which brings us life itself.

Now, it's interesting that following this apparent conclusion, we then get chapter 21 and the story of Jesus on the beach with Peter. Scholars reckon this ending was probably added a bit later on.

Glad it was because I love that story, but it does appear as a bit of an appendix, a bonus feature if you like. And yet this added appendix itself concludes with these words attributed to John himself.

It says this, Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.

[24 : 50] reason. Now, although we sadly don't have this world of books which would be needed to tell of all that Jesus has done, I wonder if perhaps that's why we do at least have these four different but ultimately complementary accounts of Jesus' life because between them, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, they do manage to capture something of the richness, the range, the radical righteousness of this most compelling and cosmic of characters.

As John says, these Gospels were written so that we may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing, we may have life in his name.

May that be the grace and truth by which we live, both now and always. All right, we're going to draw everything together with a beautiful, classic hymn which Schmillie from the St. John's Band has kindly recorded for us this week.

A hymn which speaks of the grace and truth of God. It's the hymn, Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing. Come, O Fount of Every Blessing.

Tune my heart to sing your grace. Streams of mercy never ceasing, call for songs of loudest praise.

[26 : 38] songs of God's abundant treasure, sung by angels tongues above, songs that tell the boundless measure of my Lord's unchanging love.

I remember God's great mercy, by His help I've safely come.

And I know He will not fail me, but will surely bring me home.

Jesus sought me when a stranger, wandering far away from God, and to rescue me from danger.

shed for me His precious blood. Through God's grace I am His debtor, daily I this thought renew.

[28 : 10] Let that grace, Lord, like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to You.

Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love.

Take my heart, O take and seal it, seal it from Your courts above.

Fantastic.

All right. Do remember, there's an extra time to tune into, should you wish, to think through some further thoughts and questions and all that we've been exploring today.

[29 : 08] And as I said at the top, next week's Sunday session here on YouTube will be the last one of these videos in this format for a little while, really because I need to devote my attention for now to the local matter of getting us open again as a gathered church.

There won't be an extra time next week, therefore, just a Sunday session. But it'd be great to join you next week, though, so hopefully see you then. Until then, let's go to with the reassurance of knowing God's blessing over us.

And so, may the blessing of God, the fount of every blessing. May God's blessing dwell on you and me this week, so that we may know the grace and truth, the light and life which comes from dwelling in the presence of the one who dwells with us both now and always.

Amen.