

THE MYSTERY AT THE HEART OF LIFE & ITS MEANING

Something which has existed since the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our own eyes, which we have watched and touched with our own hands, the Word of life – this is our theme. That life was made visible; we saw it and are giving our testimony, declaring to you the eternal life, which was present to the Father and has been revealed to us. We are declaring to you what we have seen and heard, so that you too may share our life. Our life is shared with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We are writing this to you that our joy may be complete. (1 Jn 1:1-4)

From the material senses without to the spiritual mystery within

Each of us sees, hears and even touches many other human beings. It helps us get to know them and is regarded as entirely normal. Most would not see it as mysterious though some would accept that each person has mysterious depths within what can be more easily experienced and even measured. This may find expression in creative and resourceful individuality and it may call forth respect, wonder. It may have the capacity to surprise and lead to new discoveries. Yet, John indicates that his experience - and that of the other apostles and their immediate associates - of seeing, hearing and touching Jesus of Nazareth went far beyond even these fairly typical experiences. It was unusual and unique and led to an entirely different discovery. They came to the realisation that who they were touching was not a human creature but God, the Word of Life. If seeing, hearing and touching a normal person can suggest and point to a sense of mystery at the heart of each human life, then seeing, hearing, touching – in short experiencing and befriending – Jesus points to and leads to an encounter with the Mystery of Life itself.

The Mystery of God – hidden and now revealed

That God is indefinable and beyond normal categorisation was well-known to the Jews and at the heart of their religion and its prescriptions against idolatry and more besides. Moses has to make do with being told to describe God as “I am who am” (Ex 3:14). Yet at the same time they knew that God made himself known and allowed people to sense Divine presence, wisdom and power behind, within and beyond creation and the particular acts of history as well as the specific acts and covenant relationship God has with Israel.

Now John was claiming that this same Divinity is present in a uniquely full way in this carpenter from Nazareth. Something at the heart of Jesus is in deep communion with what they understand as God. John concluded that the Word who was with God from the beginning has now been made flesh and lived among people (Jn 1: 2,14). He echoes the faith of the writer of the letter to the Hebrews. “At many moments in the past and by many means, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets; but, in our own time, the final days, he has spoken to us in the person of his Son (Heb 1:1-2).”

Jesus made God visible, touchable and audible in new and clearer ways. He is the image of the invisible God (Co1 1:15). ‘Mystery’ literally means secret – and it is understood as that which God had kept secret from the beginning and was the heart of his plan and the means of salvation for his people. In Jesus, it is revealed! He is what many kings and prophets longed to see and never saw, to hear and never heard! (Lk 10:23-24) He literally fleshed out what had been communicated to Moses -and also provided teaching to cast light on and paint in many details of the mysterious presence who he is. His great I am statements or sermons in

John's gospel do this. We are no longer left just with 'I am who am' but I am who am the Light of the World (Jn 8), the Good Shepherd (Jn 10), the true Vine (Jn 15) etc.

The Need for Faith big enough to Embrace and Express Mystery

The mystery is now revealed and yet it remains a mystery! We sense that what Jesus says and does, even who he is, is like the tip of an ice-berg when it comes to the full mystery of God – and even his dealings with us. There is so much more still hidden, in the depths of the Divine ocean. It is important that our faith extends to an affirmation of the whole – and does not seek to stop at what can be put into words, and – worse still- then tries and reduces this to what can be rationalised as credible by man-made proportions and yardsticks. To switch metaphors, what is revealed – each 'I am' statement for instance – is like a tree in a great forest. We are inclined to focus on the tree so much – or even a few trees – that we lose the sense of the forest that surrounds us on all fronts! Certainly let us learn everything we can from each concrete piece of revelation – and we will never exhaust even these in a lifetime – but let us affirm the still bigger whole they point to, that they are just the edge of. Let us be confident to affirm the sense of mystery as part of faith and not the enemy of faith that faith – and especially faith seeking understanding – has to overcome. Rather faith is set free to be faith by affirming mystery at its heart. As such it becomes accessible and approachable not just by the mind but in lots of other ways too.

John does not describe his theme as the Word that he has understood but as the Word that he has seen and heard and touched. So close and familiar and yet so distinct and removed – utterly other - at the same time! John– the beloved disciple – was very familiar with Jesus and had special graced insights into who he was. He knew with his heart – through love – as much as with his head, though loving and knowing, the heart and head are deeply connected. An awareness of the mystery of God's presence and action, in which we progressively are aware of living and moving, is a liberation John announced as Good News, bringing joy (I Jn 1:4).

Mary, enveloped by the Mystery: example of how to live with it

Another person who knew him intimately from the outset was Mary. In fact, Mary knew him in a way no-one else did. Others knew him first with the eyes of flesh and then with faith. Mary knew him first in faith and then in the flesh and this uniquely. Though she did not have the theology of Incarnation or Trinity to help her, she believed the message of the angel Gabriel and consented to it and so God became human in her womb (Lk 1:26-38). This is an extraordinary act of faith and one that many Christians overlook. Besides putting her own marriage and life at risk, it went beyond Jewish orthodoxy of her day. It gave her, and to a degree St Joseph who believed too, an absolutely unique appreciation of the Mystery of God, one that grew and sustained her faith through all the hardship and rejection from Bethlehem to Calvary and finally on to Pentecost. One can now only wonder, but also perhaps want to have eaves dropped, on the conversations she probably shared with John about who Jesus was after he took her into his house! His writings suggest their fruit.

A pregnant woman knows that what is growing in her is of her flesh yet is not her – it is distinct, other. Mary knew that this other came from God by his will and as a free gift. Yet this life, this child, was of her flesh too. Even if she did not have the words to express it, at a profound level she lived with the most profound knowledge of and love for the mystery of God now revealed. She touched, saw and heard and even fed the Word of Life and she continued to believe, to know, to love. No wonder she treasured and pondered everything in her heart (Lk 2:19). Combined with the dispositions of a humble handmaid, this is the best way to live with the mystery of God in Christ. It is a good way for us too to grow in it, and witness to it.

© Andrew Brookes

[Gospel Seeds: 06/01] *To make contact: Andrew Brookes, 119 B Arbroath Rd, Dundee, DD4 6HS, Tel: 01382 462463. Email: andrewbrookes@straitmail.co.uk*

(This may be reproduced for free distribution if authorship / copyright are noted.)