

John I Colossians I

Making a beginning

A couple of weeks ago, both the Conservative, and the Labour, Party fired the opening shots in the election campaign. They arranged press conferences, unveiled posters, looked rather pleased. Neither got the applause they craved. The Labour Party used a picture of David Cameron and some terrible prediction about the future of the NHS. Unfortunately, the picture of Mr Cameron was one that the Conservatives themselves had dropped because it was too flattering -airbrushed and youthful. Labour had made Mr Cameron look better than he is, and that was not the intention at all. The Conservatives meanwhile, used a picture of a long straight road stretching out ahead, and over it, the words *Let's start on the road to a stronger economy*. Nothing wrong with that you might think, until it was pointed out that the road is not in England, it is not even in the UK. This was a road near Weimar. So the message became *Let's start on the road to a stronger economy in Germany*. Beginnings matter. I have talked about this before, authors of books know that first lines and opening passages are crucial – *it was a bright cold day in April and the clocks were striking thirteen*; or *It was the day my grandmother exploded*. Making the right beginning matters, you must set the right agenda, say what needs to be said.

This morning we have had not one, but two, opening sentences. The beginning of John's gospel and the beginning of the letter to the Colossians. We are going to take a quick tour of what they say and then we are going to ask *Is this the right beginning; does this say what needs to be said?*

John's gospel starts at the very beginning (which as Julie Andrews reminds us, is a very good place to start). The first words of John are: *In the beginning*. It is a quotation, quite deliberately it says what someone else has already said. This is how Genesis starts. In the beginning is how both set out their stall. So John wants us to know that this story he is about to tell is the same story you heard before in Genesis.

It is not a new story, it is not a different story and it is a story that starts at the very beginning. Luke tells us about history - emperors called Augustus and governors called Pontius Pilate. Mark tells a religious story, about prophets in the wilderness saying *make straight the way of the Lord*. But John's story is about what has been true from the beginning. Actually he tells us his story is *always* true, true for ever, because what you see in Jesus has always been there and always will be.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

This, John says, is what you heard before, in the Old Testament and this is the same for ever. This, John says, is always true - when Jesus turns water in to wine, heals a young boy, or feeds a crowd, well then, God is like that for ever.

And, notice, Jesus (the same for ever), in John's gospel is called the *Word*.

In the beginning was the Word?

Now, this is still the first sentence of the gospel and we are beginning to feel in need of a lie down. What does that mean? When John says Jesus is the *Word*, he means that Jesus is what God has to say about himself, Jesus is the language God gives us for talking about God. John is striding into the seminar room and turning over the table. Earnest people who rarely get out are prodding a text with their pens were just saying

God is one unique spiritual substance, entirely simple and unchangeable

When in marches John and say *No, No, Jesus is what we have to say about God. Jesus is what he looks like, Jesus is how he acts.*

Now that is pretty startling in itself, but John has not finished. When John says Jesus is the *Word* he wants us to understand that Jesus is the *Word* God speaks, the language God uses about himself. But, he also wants us to understand that Jesus is the very *Last Word*. Jesus is the final word, the explanation, the definition. Jesus the *Word* of God is the reason, logic, and proof about God. Jesus is the last word.

And not everyone likes this. The proof of God turns out not to be welcome. John has quite a lot to say about the world not knowing Jesus and people not accepting him. But, like it or not he is still the last word, true forever and he is not going to be driven away or defeated.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it

And that, is what the very important beginning of John's gospel tells us. It tells us this is the story that was true from the beginning and will always be true. It tells us that Jesus is the last word and only word about God, all we need to know. It tells us that the world is difficult and dangerous and dark and that Jesus is a light that will not be out. Award yourself a gold star and a round of applause, you now understand the prologue of John.

And we also heard this morning the beginning of Colossians. Don't worry you are not about to get another ten minutes on Colossians. And anyway the brighter sparks amongst you are about to leap up and remind me we actually heard Colossians 15-20 and that is not the beginning of Colossians at all. Paul was a trained letter writer, he had been to letter writing school. His letters begin with what is called an exordium, the bit of the letter where you welcome your audience, make everyone feel better, verse 15 is where the argument starts. All I want you to notice is that it is the same argument, the same statement, in slightly different words

[Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created,

The same reference to the creation, to the very beginning; the same assumption that Jesus was there and always will be there, Christ the always true and the same determination that Jesus Christ is what God looks like – *he is the image of the invisible God*. And, notice, he has dominion over the powers and he is the firstborn from the dead. It is the same message about the world being dark and dangerous sometimes, and the same conviction that Christ will not be defeated.

That is quite a lot of theology for one morning. Why? Why is it so important to know this? Beginnings matter remember, John and Paul are both setting out their stall, establishing the

theme, grabbing you by the lapels and saying urgently 'Now, hear this'. This is what you need to know. You, we, need to know that this story was true from the beginning and will always be true. Need to know that Jesus is the last word and only word about God, and *all* we need to know. Need to know that the world can be dangerous and dark and that Jesus is a light that will not be out. Paul and Colossians know what they want to tell us, know how to tell us.

The rest of us, me, well I am not sure we are so good at that. I am still haunted by a school visit years ago, fifteen years ago, when I was a Vicar in London. I answered their questions, it was bright and breezy and you could see the school teacher thinking 'Ah, hear is a vicar who knows how to talk'. So she asked me a last question, an important question, because she thought this was her big chance to let them hear a Christian say something sensible about the faith. She asked me almost as they were about to go out of the door, 'Tell us why you believe?' And I dithered. I did not do what John does, and Paul does. I did not know where to start.

My problem, usually, is that I am a bit academic. I can always think of another phrase that needs to be in there to make it a bit less misleading. I always want to say this and then that. Or, I can think of another way of saying the same thing to show that it is subtle and interesting. So I dither. Or on other occasions I get fussed that I will say go all deep and meaningful and cringe-worthy, I think I will embarrass myself or the person who is listening by saying something about love and beauty and mystery. Or I think I will sound pompous, or over-bearing, or just barking mad. I have more excuses than you can shake a stick at for not putting my faith into words.

And, forgive me if this is a little forthright, but so do most of you. The Christian gospel is dying in the suburbs of desperately good taste because too many of us are too anxious about sounding cringe-worthy, or pompous, or barking mad. God spoke the Word, the Word that is true from the beginning and true for ever and we keep it tidily in a book in the cathedral for fear of embarrassing anyone. We have to do better, I have to do better.

The Precentor, may God bless her, her cloak and her cats, has arranged a Lent that should engage all of us. There is a discipline in there for everyone here. This is my challenge to you for Lent. Ask yourself where do you make your beginning, what is it you have to say about your faith. Find the words because until you have done what John did and Paul did and made the beginning, the words will not be there when you need them.

Your words do not need to be my words, they will be much better, much livelier if they are your words. The words do not need to be complicated – remember John strode into the seminar room and turned the table over, told us all to talk about Jesus. I think maybe you need to remind yourself that the words are true forever, even if there are not many of them they are big words and they should be words that are serious about what is dark and dangerous and still full of hope.

That is what I ask of you this Lent, make a beginning; make your beginning. Find the words and then be ready to use them, tell the truth that is true forever about the light that shines in the darkness, the light that will never, ever be extinguished.