

Excerpts

Excerpt from the Introduction

Some years ago, the Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year A, loomed ahead of me and with it a gospel lesson in the lectionary from John 14:1-14. For most of the week I struggled with the thick language of this passage. Finally in some desperation I settled on the old and familiar word of Jesus in verse 6: "Jesus said to him [Thomas], 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life.'" In the sermon I spoke of each of the three predicates—way, truth, and life. The sermon was a classic three pointer with time spent on each of the three terms by which Jesus identifies himself. (I seldom resort to three-point sermons any more, but theoretically I maintain they are still useful at times with certain texts.) Regarding the term "way," my sermon discussed Christ as a means to eternal life. Under "truth," I argued that Jesus is all the truth we really need to know. With the third point, I asserted that true life is what Christ offers us. As any good preacher would, I tried as best I could to explicate the meaning of these terms and thereby clarify what the passage means today. It really was not a bad sermon. But as I look at it now, I realize that I diluted the saying of all ambiguity. In ten minutes I pretended to solve the problem that students of the fourth Gospel have wrestle with for years!

Most of us preachers have struggled long into the night with such a passage as this. Getting the Gospel of John to speak clearly is often a tiresome task. The sections of the fourth Gospel in which Jesus speaks are especially dense. There seems to be no connection between bits and pieces of his discourse. We often stumble over individual words that seem to mean so much and yet are hard to pin down with precision. What exactly does Jesus mean by spirit, for instance? Or, in the lesson discussed above, what meaning should we attach to those three words by which Jesus identifies himself?

The narratives about Jesus are not much easier. There are hints that certain actions attributed to Jesus reach beyond the context of a particular story to mean something more. But, again, how do we discern where they reach? Sometimes it looks like Jesus' words comment on something he has done, which appears to be the case in chapter 6. The long discourse of the "bread of life" seems to comment on the feeding of the crowd that begins the chapter. Often Jesus' words reach back or forward in the plot to some narrative; other times it looks as if a discourse has nothing to do with the narratives surrounding it.

The theological ideas of this Gospel, too, are profound—there is little doubt about that. Yet, so much of what Jesus says at one point is explicitly or implicitly denied, contradicted, or at least made more complicated elsewhere. What are we to make, for instance, of the fact that Jesus claims he judges no one (8:15), yet elsewhere asserts that he does judge and his judgment is just (5:30)? Thick language, dense discourses, tantalizing relationships between discourse and narratives, and puzzling theology are all part of the struggle we have with preaching on the Gospel of John.