

I have said before in previous homilies, that one cannot understand the Gospel of John unless you come at any portion of the Gospel with the Prologue firmly in mind. The Prologue is the executive summary of the whole gospel. The rest of the Gospel exists to support and illustrate the Prologue. The purpose of each story within the Gospel is not the report of something that happened; it is a story to illustrate the truth of the Prologue. Here are the first 5 verses of the Prologue: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.* And then the 14th verse: *And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.* A second thing that is important to remember in order to understand the Gospel of John is that it was written at least 60 years after the crucifixion and resurrection and at least 25 years after the last letter by Paul. A third thing that is important to remember is that the separation of Followers of the Way from the synagogue was either nearing completion or was, in fact complete, at the time the Gospel of John was written.

Our passage this evening is part of an encounter between Jesus and a group of Pharisees. The encounter begins in the Temple. Jesus is teaching a large group of people. The lesson is interrupted by a group of Scribes and Pharisees who arrive with a woman who has been caught in adultery. The scribes and the Pharisees say to Jesus, *Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?* They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus famously says to them, *Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.* All who would condemn her disappear. But the encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees continues. You may remember from last week if you were with us, that when John writes "The Jews" he is referring to the Jewish religious authorities. Much of the rest of Chapter 8 before our reading this evening is Jesus contrasting the fates of those who believe in him and those who do not believe.

The encounter reaches its breaking point just as our passage begins: Jesus says: *Whoever is from God hears the words of God. The reason you do not hear them is that you are not from God.* The response from the Pharisees is to accuse Jesus of being a Samaritan which was a great insult in 1st century Judea for Samaritans were not just foreigners they were judged to be apostates because they were a result of intermarriage between some of the original tribes of Israel and diverse Gentiles aka, the unclean. He is also accused of having a demon. The rest of our reading continues an earlier contretemps over Abraham. With the Jewish religious authorities incredulous that Jesus who is not yet 50, but he claims to have seen Abraham. Jesus replies *Very truly, I tell you before Abraham was I am.* Then it became Jesus turn to be stoned, but he hid himself and escaped.

Before Abraham was I am clearly asserts the truth of the Prologue In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. The 14th verse of the Prologue: *And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.* Is precisely what the religious authorities cannot see in Jesus. Earlier in Chapter 8 before our passage begins Jesus says to the religious authorities: *"If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God, and now I am here. I did not come on my own, but he sent me. 43 Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot accept my word. 44 You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him.* Again, this reinforces the 10th and 11th verses of the Prologue: *He was in the world, and word came into being through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.* As well as illustrating the meaning of the Prologue, Chapters 7 through 11 set up a variety of confrontations with the religious authorities. Setting the stage for the eventual arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus which all begins in Chapter 12.

John was writing at a time when the Followers of the Way were challenged to establish themselves independent of the Synagogue from which they had been banished. So John's Gospel has the significant purpose of giving legitimacy to the nascent church and distinguishing that church from the synagogue. So at one level there is a polemical character to the Gospel when there are several stories of confrontation with the religious authorities. And like most polemics a villain is required. Telling these stories of confrontation set in the early 30's of the Common Era legitimizes the struggles of the nascent church early in the 2nd century.

So what does it mean for us well into the 21st century? Well if you were in church last Sunday, you heard me speak in some detail about the importance of the Prologue of John. If you think of most of the rest of the Gospel as illustrations from a particular time of the meaning of that Prologue you will find other riches and perhaps analogies to our own time. As rich as is the Prologue, so is what the NRSV describes as the Summary of Jesus' teaching in Chapter 12: Then Jesus cried aloud: *"Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me. I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness. I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world but to save the world.*

So if Jesus is not the judge, what right do we have to judge and especially what right do we have to pervert the Gospel of John to justify antisemitism? John also reported Jesus' new commandment: *Love one another just as I have loved you...By this everyone will know that you are my disciples.* Dare I say, without that love we cannot be his disciples. Amen