Chapter 6
The God Who Came to Earth

John's gospel stands apart from those of Matthew, Mark and Luke. It is generally thought to have been written later than theirs and certainly later than the letters of St Paul. Some New Testament scholars think it may not have been written until the first decade of the second century, though others favour an earlier date. Although the author is unknown, the last chapter of the gospel all but identifies him as John, the disciple of Jesus: 'It is this same disciple [whom Jesus loved] who vouches for what has here been written . . . he it is who wrote it.' This was certainly the view held by some of the founding fathers of the early Christian Church, but there are grounds for questioning it. It strains the imagination to suppose that a document as sophisticated as the fourth gospel could have been written by someone who is described in the Acts of the Apostles as an 'uneducated layman' and who would, at the time, have been at least eighty years old.

John's gospel differs sharply from the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke in a number of striking respects – differences that, as we shall see, became of critical importance to the early Church as it tried to hammer out its core beliefs about the human Jesus and his relationship to God. In the synoptic gospels Jesus often speaks in parables; in John he does not. In the synoptic gospels there are many stories of Jesus casting out devils; in John there is none. In the synoptic gospels Jesus typically refuses to give any signs of his status or authority; in John he gives many. In the synoptic gospels Jesus is reluctant to say who he is; in John he is often the principal subject of his long conversations with his disciples (the 'I am' statements). In the synoptic gospels there are numerous references to Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God; in John there is only one. In the synoptic gospels Jesus makes extensive use of simile ('the kingdom of God is like . . . '); in John there are no similes and Jesus speaks in lengthy discourses that are stylistically rounded and theologically profound. It is, of course, possible that Jesus talked and taught in these two different ways, and that while the synoptic gospels have captured one half of his style, the author of John's gospel has picked up the other; but it is

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not an explanation that many find convincing. Rather, the theologically sophisticated words that are put into Jesus' mouth in the fourth gospel are now commonly seen as the later reflections of an unknown but spiritually cultured author.

Because of these differences between John's gospel and the other three, the question arises of why it was written. There are several possibilities. One is that its author may have been writing particularly for Greek-speaking readers in the Middle East who would have been quite comfortable with the idea of a god inhabiting, or even becoming, a human being – the Word made flesh, as the gospel puts it. Others have suggested that the gospel was written as a Christian rejoinder to the Gnostic tendencies that were infiltrating the infant Church and seriously threatening its emerging beliefs about the nature of God. As we shall see, the Gnostics regarded God as a perfect spiritual being, and they rejected any suggestion that he could have lived on earth in a human body. John's insistence that the eternal Word became flesh in the person of Jesus is a weighty rejoinder to the heresy of Gnosticism, for throughout his gospel he repeatedly stresses the divine symbiosis between the Father and the Son. By emphasising Jesus' absolute equality with God, John can be seen as laying one of the early foundation stones in what was later (after centuries of theological disputation) to become the Church's settled doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

The relationship between Jesus and God is set out at the very start of John's gospel, where the opening verses introduce a concept that would have been familiar to both Jewish and Greek audiences: the Word, or *Logos*. Jews would have recognised it as the creative Word of God through which, according to the creation stories in Genesis, the world was formed ('God *said*: let there be . . . '), and Greeks would have understood it as the order and harmony behind all things. According to the prologue in John's gospel, the Word had not only been with God from the beginning of all things, he had actually become incarnate in the human Jesus. Jesus was not merely the mouthpiece of the Word, he *was* the Word. 'So the Word became flesh; he made his home among us, and we saw his glory, such glory as befits the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth.' It would be difficult to over-estimate the importance of this verse for the Church's early beliefs about the complex relationship between Jesus, the Word and God: the Word, who had been with God from the beginning, became human in the person of Jesus and lived in a specific place and time in the history of the world.

It was to explain and justify this dramatic claim in the opening verses

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of John's gospel that the rest of it was written. The text is organised around seven miracles that Jesus is said to have performed; and to ensure that the reader does not miss them, the first two (the wedding at Cana-in-Galilee and the healing of the official's son) are conveniently labelled 'first' and 'second'. Thereafter the numbering runs out but the structure remains. The other five miracles are the healing of the crippled man at the Pool of Bethesda, the feeding of the five thousand, the walking on the water, the curing of the blind man and the raising of Lazarus. Six of the seven miracles are accompanied by a 'discourse' explaining the meaning of the event, followed by a statement in which Jesus reveals himself as the pathway to its fulfilment. For example, the miraculous feeding of the five thousand on the Galilean hillside is followed by a sermon about the bread of eternal life and, later, by Jesus' assurance that whoever believes in him will never lack spiritual food or drink.

John's purpose in setting out these miraculous signs and noting their significance was to reveal Jesus Christ as the divine Son of God, sent by the Father in heaven to bring eternal life to those who believed in him. It was all made possible by a powerfully stated yet ultimately enigmatic three-way union between the Father, the Son and each individual believer. The first part of the union, between the Father and the Son, is one of the outstanding themes of the gospel. In striking contrast to the synoptic gospels, where Jesus almost invariably refers to himself as the Son of Man, in John's gospel he speaks repeatedly of God as the heavenly Father and himself as the divine Son. Evidence of this ethereal yet inseparable union between Father and Son is scattered generously throughout the gospel. Indeed, so close are they that at times they actually merge into one another: 'The Father and I are one'. There cannot be a closer relationship between two people than this – an absolute equality of being between God and Jesus in which their unity penetrates to the very depths of their being. One is a mirror image of the other: 'I am in the Father and the Father [is] in me'. There is nothing in Matthew, Mark or Luke that matches the depth and symbiosis in John's words.

The enigmatic relationship between the Father and the Son in John's gospel extends also to those who believe in Jesus, for they too are caught up in the unity of the Father and the Son to form a mystical trinity: 'May they all be one; as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, so also may they be in us.' John carries this union between Jesus and his followers to dramatic lengths in the metaphor of bread. When the people of Israel were wandering in the wilderness on their way from Egypt to Canaan, God had sent manna from heaven for them to eat. A psalmist called it 'the bread of angels'. Now Jesus is offering them 'bread from

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heaven . . . that brings life to the world.' This bread, however, is no mere processed grain, it is the very body of Jesus himself: 'I am the living bread which has come down from heaven . . . Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood dwells in me and I am in him.' A union between two persons, one divine and one human, can scarcely get more darkly enigmatic than this, and it is no surprise that it led to a fierce argument among the Jews about the meaning of Jesus' words.

It was, moreover, not only the Jews who could enter into this symbiotic relationship with Jesus. So too could non-Jews. John writes that: 'There are other sheep of mine . . . I must lead them as well, and they too will listen to my voice.' Jesus had alien sheep to tend, the Gentiles among John's readership, and he had to ensure that there would be 'one flock and one shepherd'. Yet so swiftly does John rearrange his metaphors that the shepherd who is prepared to die for his sheep is also the lamb that is sacrificed for the sins of the world. Although the phrase 'the Lamb of God' appears only twice in John's gospel, it is a striking and significant image that has no parallel in the synoptic gospels and only a faint echo in the letters of St Paul. Some half a century earlier, in his letter to the Romans, Paul had made an oblique reference to Christ as the Passover lamb. It is only in John's gospel, however, that the full implications of the sacrificial metaphor are drawn out when John the Baptist points to Jesus and announces to those around him: 'There is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world'.

By describing Jesus in this way, the author of John's gospel was tackling the burning problem of sin and salvation in a way that must have been instantly recognisable to any Jewish reader. In using the language of expiation, he was providing a ready-made context in which to understand the nature of Christ's death – the Jewish ritual of animal sacrifice in the temple at Jerusalem. Through the words of John the Baptist, Jesus is presented to the crowd as the sacrificial scapegoat, the lamb to be slaughtered in atonement for sin; but not just any lamb and not just any sin. This lamb was the Lamb of God, God himself, and the sins for which he died were the sins of all mankind throughout eternity. When the author of John's gospel looked at Jesus he saw not only the incarnate *Logos,* the Word made flesh, but also the sacrificial lamb offered up to die as an atonement for the whole of human sinfulness. It was a vision that mixed Greek and Jewish ideas in a heady cocktail of high theology – a vision that not only fuelled a great deal of theological thinking in the early Church but also caused it some dreadful headaches as the centuries went by.

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Here, then, is John's complex image of Jesus. He is the eternal Word who came and dwelt among us, 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world', the Son who is in the Father as the Father is in him, the divine man who offers his flesh to be eaten and his blood to be drunk as an assurance of eternal life. Is this, however, the same person as the Jesus of the synoptic gospels, the Jewish rabbi who tramped the dusty highways and byways of Galilee and taught the people in simple but telling stories drawn from the lives of housewives, farmers and fishermen? The differences between Matthew, Mark and Luke on the one hand and John on the other are difficult to explain away. Is it credible that Jesus talked and behaved in two dramatically contrasting ways, one of which has been captured by the writers of the first three gospels and the other by the author of the fourth? Whereas the synoptic authors broadly depict Jesus as a radical Jewish teacher and healer seized with the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God and wanting his hearers to share the urgency of the moment by confessing their sins and turning to God, John gives us a more sophisticated Jesus who displays dimensions that are absent in Matthew, Mark and Luke. In the synoptic gospels we probably get as close as we are likely to come to the real, historical Jesus; in John's gospel, by contrast, we may have something rather different, an inspired theological interpretation of his significance in God's great scheme of redemption and salvation.

Whether the dialogue in the fourth gospel is read as the authentic words of Jesus or as an imaginative interpretation of God's nature, it does bring out an aspect of the Christian God that is absent from the synoptic gospels. John's God is an enigmatic God who goes about his business in ways that can hardly be explained through ordinary human language. In the person of the Word, he enters into a mystical union with Jesus Christ, and the two then enter into an equally mystical relationship with each individual believer in which the body of Christ himself becomes the staple necessities of human life: bread, wine and water. There are few parallels in human experience with this blend of the human and the divine in which each becomes the other. The God of John's gospel can hardly be explained in anything approaching a rational way, but the gospel's author is clear that he can be embraced in faith as the Word who became flesh and took his place in human history. It is a view of God that was to cause a great deal of anguish to the early Church as it tried to express the ineffable mystery of the incarnation in words and phrases that could define the core beliefs of the new faith and convince prospective converts of their eternal truth.

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