THE WORD OF GOD THROUGH SYMBOLS

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It may not be original to start with reference to the opening of the Letter to the Hebrews, but I believe it captures one of the firmest of Israel's convictions. "At various times in the past and in various different ways, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets" (Heb 1:1).[1] There was in Israel for centuries such a powerful prophetic tradition. And we are blessed to be heirs of that tradition. But such was Yahweh God's love and desire to share the mystery of himself, to communicate his life to us, that a gesture was needed. This supreme gesture theologians call the Incarnation - the enfleshment of the Word. "In our own time, the last days, God has spoken to us through his Son" (Heb 1:2).

John's gospel introduces this theme in that poetic piece known as the Prologue, which the late Raymond Brown calls "the pearl within the Gospel."[2] The Prologue is possibly an adaptation of an early Christian hymn based on reflection about Wisdom in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament presentation of Wisdom, there are parallels for almost every detail of the Prologue's description of the Word.[3] The Prologue furnishes us with a key with which to unlock the deepest meaning of the narrative which follows. It begins, echoing Genesis, with the familiar words: "In the beginning… was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (Jn 1:1). So, beyond our space and time categories the Word,

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[1] All Scriptural text is taken from the New Standard Revised Edition found in the *Oremus* Bible Browser, unless otherwise specified.

[2] Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 18.

[3] See Brown, *John,* 521-523; C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 274-277; Dorothy Lee, *Flesh and Glory: Symbolism, Gender and Theology in the Gospel of John* (New York: Crossroad, 2002), 32.

the *Logos* ("word") existed in dynamic love and was divine. Later in the Prologue we find that amazing statement, the twinning of incompatibles: "and the Word became flesh, and pitched tent amongst us" (Jn 1:14). The divine Word becomes a human being at a particular moment in history, in a particular place in our world, and has a human name, Jesus. And now it is through the words, actions, life and death of Jesus that our God addresses us.

This term "the Word," *Logos* in Greek, already had a long history in Greek thought, as far back as Heraclitus in the sixth century BC. Later the Stoic philosophers considered the Logos to be the power which shaped and guided the world. It was, however, the Jewish background, I believe, which seems to have had the determining influence on the evangelist.

The biblical concept of the "word of God" (*dabar* in Hebrew) is extremely rich. This term *dabar* is used in two ways. Firstly, it has to do with understanding, enlightenment and revelation. In this sense God manifested his will for the people in the conduct of their lives, the ten "words," the Law. Through the prophets God enlightened Israel about the events of its history. God's word was also a word of promise and of judgement. A word inevitably entails communication, and so something of God's mystery and identity came to be understood by the people of Israel. Secondly, the word of God is dynamic and creative; "let there be light" (Gen 1:3), and light there was; it directs the course of history; it is also healing, sustaining and life-giving.

Let us examine how the evangelist John presents the Word of God in Jesus under the two aspects of revelation and action: what Jesus says and what he does.[4] The evangelist pursues his task mainly through the use of symbols and symbolic gestures

[4] The discussion on symbols that follows contains some extracts from the published book of the author, *Symbols and Spirituality: Reflecting on John's Gospel* (Bolton: Don Bosco Publications, 2007).

such as wine, light, bread, water, vines, anointing, washing feet, being lifted up. The wonderful thing about symbols is that they can transcend time and transcend cultural differences. Also, they are things which we are very familiar with in our everyday lives; we can relate easily with the imagery.

The Symbol of Wine

It is always good to start with a glass of wine, so let us train our eyes on Cana in Galilee for a wedding celebration. For the fourth evangelist, steeped in the literature of his people, such a wedding setting is bursting with significance. There the image of the wedding or espousals is frequently used as a symbol of the relationship between God and the People (see Is 62:4-5; Jer 2:2; Ezek 16; Song). Hosea proclaims: "I shall betroth you to myself for ever, bestowing righteousness and justice, loyalty and love; I shall betroth you to myself, making you faithful, and you will know the Lord (Hos 2:19-20)."

The wedding banquet is also a favourite symbol for the eschatological or end-time banquet, the coming age of blessing and joy, the messianic days, an era which in the mind of poet and dreamer over centuries will be characterised by feasting and abundance. Frequently, the prophets take wine as the image of the joy and plenty of the "last days," the new age, the overflowing richness of messianic deliverance and new covenant. Isaiah, for instance, predicts: "On this mountain the Lord of Hosts will prepare a banquet of rich fare for all the peoples, a banquet of wines well matured, richest fare and well-matured wines strained clear" (Is 25:6). And according to the vision of Amos: "A time is coming, says the Lord, when the ploughman will follow hard on the reaper, and he who treads the grapes after him who sows the seed. The mountains will run with fresh wine, and every hill will flow with it" (Amos 9:13).

At Cana, the spoken word in the story line is the hushed message of Jesus' mother, aware of the embarrassing situation emerging for the young couple, a potential disaster: "they

have no wine" (Jn 2:3). The action of Jesus, after some initial hesitation, is to provide some, 120 gallons of it, of the best vintage around. At one level, that enables the distraught couple to save face; and the party, which normally lasts for a week, to continue. At another level, it indicates that in Jesus the ancient dreams and hopes of Israel are being fulfilled, the final banquet is under way, and also that the old inadequate dispensation is being transformed from water into wine, more abundant, better quality, and Jesus is at the centre of it all. A new world is dawning. This is God's word, God's message, in this episode.

The Symbol of Light

The Prologue states: "the true light which enlightened everyone was coming into the world." Again: "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it." One of the key symbols which conveys the idea of God's communication is the symbol of light. And light, natural and artificial, is a reality very common in our lives in so many different ways.

From a Cana wedding, we now find ourselves in Jerusalem during the week-long celebration of the annual feast of Tabernacles. This was the most popular of all the pilgrimage feasts, and attracted large crowds to the Temple there. Originally it was called "ingathering," and was a harvest and vintage festival. The people lived in tents (booths, huts), and celebrated in the vineyards. Later, it took on a more clearly religious connotation, and was sometimes referred to simply as "the feast,"' or "the feast of Yahweh." It came to be associated with God's protection, care and guidance of the people during their Exodus wilderness journey and sojourn.

There were three main ceremonies throughout the celebration. The first consisted in processions, rituals and prayers connected with water. The second ceremony was the rite of prayer of allegiance by the priests, facing the Temple at first light. The third major aspect of the celebration was a ceremony of light, and this is of particular interest for our theme. Four very large candelabrae (*menorahs*) were set up in the court of

the women. At night the men danced under them with torches in their hands, whilst the Levites played instruments and sang Psalms 120-134. This went on for most of the night during the seven days. The light was reflected throughout the whole city and brightly illuminated it (see Zech 14:6-8).

Against this rich liturgical and symbolic background, Jesus speaks to the people and says: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (Jn 8:12). Light and darkness are juxtaposed, and their link with life clearly articulated. In contrast with the confines of a city bathed in the glow of candles, Jesus claims to offer light for the whole world. In response to Jewish claims that the Law provided light to guide the steps of Israel, Jesus claims that it is now he who brings a light which confers life. He goes on to claim that it is his word which communicates truth. Knowledge of this truth liberates us from the slavery of ignorance, blindness, self-deceit and sin. Unfortunately, those listening to his words react violently, picking up stones with which to kill him. So Jesus makes a hasty exit from the Temple. Darkness again seeks to overcome the light.

The word of Jesus is followed by action. As Jesus walks along, he notices a man blind from birth. He repeats his claim: "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world" (Jn 9:5), and then spreads mud made with his saliva on the man's eyes, and sends him to wash in the pool of Siloam. The man does so, and is cured. He moves from physical darkness to a situation in which he can see his neighbours and friends and the world around him, and eventually, at the end of the story, can look on Jesus face to face. At the same time, he follows a different journey from inner blindness, darkness and ignorance to the insight and vision of faith. In his discussions with the religious authorities, he recognised the man Jesus, a prophet, a man from God, he finally acknowledges him as the Son of Man, the one who makes God known, the "sent one," the light of the world, and kneels in worship.

Whilst the man is journeying into the light, the religious leaders, in parallel but in the other direction, are plunging more and more into blindness and darkness. This twofold interconnected movement is one of the fascinating aspects of the drama.

The Symbol of Bread

Another important Johannine symbol is the bread of life. Again, we have action and word, this time the action comes first, and the words in the form of a lengthy discourse follow. The action is the famous incident when Jesus provides a meal, a banquet of bread and fish for the crowds in the vicinity of the lake. In John's version of the episode, it is a young boy who provides the initial wherewithal, and Jesus alone who feeds them, and there is more left over at the end than there was at the beginning – again we find the imagery of banquet and abundance as at Cana. It is a sign that the longed-for time of renewal has arrived in Jesus.

The incident is followed next day by a lengthy dialogue/discourse. The crowds come to Jesus wanting more bread, but he tries to direct them onto a different level, and to a different kind of bread. In the background is the OT story of the manna in the wilderness, referred to as bread from heaven. Jesus claims that he is the bread from heaven. God through Moses provided manna in the desert, but he, Jesus, provides a new and different kind of bread. "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" (Jn 6:35). Those who eat this bread, unlike the wilderness people, will never die, but will live forever. So, what is this bread?

The principal meaning of the symbolism of the bread of life in this first part of the dialogue/discourse of chapter six is the revelation which Jesus brings, the revelation he is, as Word of God enfleshed. In Jewish circles, the image of *manna* was often used to denote instruction, divine word, or wisdom. The Old

Testament often presents divine word or wisdom under the symbol of bread. The rabbis interpreted it as the Law, a source of revelation and life.

For John the old dispensation proved inadequate; its results were ongoing hunger and atrophy. The real, genuine bread from heaven is the revelation which the Father provides in and through Jesus. This bread satisfies hunger, gives true and enduring nourishment, and leads to "eternal life," bringing to fulfilment and replacing what Moses had offered. The highpoint of this revelation, as we shall see, takes place in the self-giving of Jesus when the "hour" has come, and the Son of Man is "lifted up," and as the Good Shepherd, gives his life for the sheep.

At this point in the discourse there is a change of perspective as Jesus states: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (Jn 6:51). There is a clear change of vocabulary; instead of bread, we find the term "flesh." The language is now unmistakably eucharistic: bread, bread which is flesh, giving, for the world, and later blood and the invitation to eat and drink. These words, scholars maintain, reflect the eucharistic celebration of the Johannine community.

As the discussion continues, Jesus emphasises that the result of partaking of his flesh and blood is the complete reciprocal indwelling of Jesus and the believer. This is a participation in the communion existing between Father and Son. This indwelling is a present reality, and is an equivalent to having eternal life, being saved, now. As Jesus draws life from the living Father, so the believer now draws life from Jesus.

I find God's word here is so uplifting: now, already, you and I dwell in God and God in us. In John's gospel, this theme will be picked up again and further developed in the vine and branches imagery at the Last Supper.

The Symbol of Water

Water has always been a source of fascination and wonder. There is a comfort and familiarity about water, but water can bring terror and wreak havoc also, as floods have reminded us. Throughout our human story water has stimulated art and poetry, music and drama. Water has stirred the religious mind too, and in many religions has been used in ritual and ceremony, but also as a symbol, a symbol for cleansing, for quenching thirst, and for life-giving. This is particularly true for the Judeo-Christian faith and tradition. The fourth evangelist, drawing on a long literary and liturgical tradition, exploits the potential of this symbol as a vehicle for expressing the message and significance of Jesus. It is a "core symbol," a key theme. It courses through the gospel narrative like a stream in the hills; it ebbs and flows like the breathing of the sea.

In the course of John's gospel Jesus is identified through a number of symbols, as we have seen: he is, for example, the light of the world, the bread of life. However, he is never identified with water; rather, he is the one who provides water for us.

One of the most significant dialogues in the fourth gospel takes place in the Jerusalem encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus, a pre-eminent teacher in Israel, a Pharisee, and a member of the highest governing body of Judaism. He approaches Jesus by night, moving from the darkness into the light. He confidently acknowledges that Jesus must come "from God," given the signs which he is performing. His introduction seems to be leading up to an important question, but Jesus responds before he can articulate it. "Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit'" (Jn 3:3-5).

This brief interaction is beautifully balanced. Jesus speaks, Nicodemus responds with two questions, which express his failure to understand and his incredulity, and Jesus speaks again, clarifying his position. The two parallel statements of Jesus are solemnly introduced by the typically Johannine double "Amen" (sometimes translated as "very truly," or "in all truth"). The first statement speaks of seeing the kingdom, the second of entering it. The first speaks of birth from above, the second of birth through water and Spirit. The phrase "the kingdom of God," which is at the heart of the message of Jesus in the other gospels, occurs only here in John. He prefers to use the term "eternal life." The theme of kingship is, however, touched on at the end of the story of the loaves and fishes, and it is central to the passion narrative.

The kind of misunderstanding of which Nicodemus is guilty, despite his theological training, is a typical literary feature of John's gospel. John frequently chooses words which have two or more meanings. Here, for instance, the Greek word *anōthen* can mean both "from above" and also "again," "for a second time." When faced with alternative levels of interpretation, Jesus' interlocutor usually takes the literal or superficial meaning, showing that he or she does not really understand what is at issue. This then enables Jesus to elucidate the true in-depth significance of what he is saying. In this case Nicodemus, confined to his limited mind-set, takes it that Jesus is talking about a second physical birth, and he expresses his surprise, naturally. Jesus, however, also intends the other meaning of the word – "from above;" he is indeed referring to a second birth, but a birth of a very different order.

The word translated as "Spirit" (*pneuma*) also carries other levels of meaning. Its normal meaning is wind or breath, and John exploits this possibility a few verses later, referring to the wind which comes and goes, blowing where it pleases, and comparing this to those "born of the Spirit." Here, water

is not mentioned; the emphasis in the rest of the discourse is on the Spirit.

In the context of this conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, "water and breath" can at one level refer to the normal process of human childbirth. After the rupture of the amniotic waters, the child leaves the womb and breathes the breath of life, fresh air. But this combination of physical elements can also point to a different kind of birth, a new kind of birth, birth 'from above," birth through the action of the Spirit. It is through this birthing that a person can enter the Kingdom of God, and come to share a new dimension of life, "eternal life," the life of "the above," becoming a child of God. "Physical birth becomes a symbol of spiritual birth."[5]

New birth through the combination of water and Spirit is a pointer also to Christian baptism. Water baptism alone is inadequate. The accompanying gift of the Spirit "from above" transforms the significance of the water ritual. Through this twofold experience embracing heaven and earth, the sphere of flesh and the sphere of Spirit, the believer enters the Christian community and is caught up in the Kingdom or Reign of God. Here water is not so much a symbol of purification, but a symbol of new life.

The water theme quickly flows into the subsequent chapter of the Gospel in which a significant encounter takes place between Jesus and a Samaritan woman. Jesus, weary from the journey is resting by Jacob's well at Sychar. The disciples go off into the town to buy food. A local woman, whose name we never get to know, comes to the well to draw water, a chore usually completed in the morning or evening. There are many important encounters at wells in the OT (romantic stories of Rebecca and Rachel, for instance). As is often the case in the fourth gospel it is Jesus who takes the initiative. Acknowledging

[5] Lee, *Flesh and Glory*, 70.

his need, he asks the woman for a drink: "Give me a drink" (Jn 4:10). At first sight this seems quite a natural thing to do. He is thirsty, and she has access to the water of the well. But Jesus is disregarding religious and cultural convention. The woman is not slow to express her surprise that a Jew should flout the norms of his people and make such a request of her, a Samaritan. The relationship between the two peoples had been strained for centuries. Besides, in speaking with a woman in public, Jesus is choosing to disregard the cultural gender barrier. This the disciples later find quite shocking. Jesus replies to her with an invitation: "If only you knew what God gives, and who it is that is asking you for a drink, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

The woman points out some of the practical difficulties: the well is deep, and he has no bucket. She is thinking about ordinary water. But Jesus is really speaking about a thirst of a different order, a thirst and longing and need for God (see Ps 42:1-2a; 63:1; 143:6). Correspondingly, he is speaking of a different kind of water. Jesus replies: "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water that I shall give will never suffer thirst any more. The water that I shall give will be an inner spring always welling up for eternal life" (Jn 4:13-14).[6]

We leave the story line there, and ask ourselves what is this "living water" that Jesus offers as the "gift of God?" I believe that "living water" probably refers primarily to the revelation which Jesus brings, a revelation which is supremely life-giving. In the Old Testament water is found as a symbol for divine Wisdom nourishing the thirsty and satisfying their needs, providing insight and knowledge (Prov 9:1-5; 13:4; 18:4; Is 55:1; Sir 15:3; 24:21). In rabbinic tradition water is also the symbol of the Law.

[6] Taken from *New English Bible* (Oxford and Cambridge University Press, 1970).

Some scholars suggest that "living water" probably refers also to the Holy Spirit.[7] In his dialogue with Nicodemus Jesus has already linked water and spirit in the new birth through which it becomes possible to enter the Kingdom and share in the gift of eternal life. "It signifies both the Spirit and the word/revelation/wisdom which Jesus embodies in his own person and gives to those who are thirsty. No barrier of race or gender can stand in the way of such a gift."[8]

The next extract which contains this water theme comes from a section of the fourth gospel which deals with the Jewish feast of Tabernacles. Earlier we saw the light element of that celebration. Another key element was a daily ceremony connected with water. This consisted in a morning procession to the Pool of Siloam, where a priest gathered some water in a golden container, and the procession returned to the Temple through the Water Gate, where the ram's horn was sounded three times. The priests and people then processed around the altar, singing psalms and waving *lulabs* (a bunch of twigs of myrtle, palm and willow), and citrons. On arriving at the altar the presiding priest poured the water and wine into two vessels on the altar, allowing the water and wine to pour out onto the altar. On the seventh day of the feast the procession around the altar was repeated seven times. Against the background of the Temple, brightly illuminated each night, Jesus will claim to be the true light of the world. Similarly, against the background of daily processions and ceremonies connected with water and harvest, he speaks of himself as the solution to the deepest thirsts of our human heart.

The text reads as follows: "On the last day, the great day of the festival, Jesus stood and cried out: "Let anyone who is

[7] See Brown, *John Vol 1,* 178-9; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to John Vol. 1* (London: Herder and Herder, 1968), 426; Dorothy Lee, *The Symbolic Narratives of the Fourth Gospel: The Interplay of Form and Meaning* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 76-78.

[8] Lee, *Flesh and Glory*, 76-77.

thirsty come to me! Let anyone who believes in me come and drink! As scripture says, 'From his heart shall flow streams of living water.' He was speaking of the Spirit which those who believed in him were to receive; for there was no Spirit as yet because Jesus was not yet glorified" (Jn 7:37-39).[9]

Once again we find the image of "living water," life-giving water, and water is again linked initially with the quenching of thirst. The invitation recently offered to the Samaritan woman is now offered more widely to the people of Jerusalem and the pilgrims from further afield, indeed to anyone. Here the meaning of "living water" is rendered explicit by the narrator's comment. It refers primarily to the Spirit.

There is some ambiguity in the Greek text, which has led to a debate amongst scholars concerning the source of this "living water."' Most adopt the view that the source is Jesus. It is from his heart that the living waters flow. For it is he who offers to provide the thirst-quenching drink for the Samaritan woman. He feeds the people by the lakeside and claims to be "bread of life." It is he who is the source of light for the world and the genuine Shepherd. In the course of the gospel he systematically brings the Jewish feasts to new levels of fulfilment. And it is through his death that salvation comes. This view is called the Christological interpretation.

Other commentators suggest that the waters flow from the heart of the believer; through being joined with Christ there is a sense in which the Christian becomes a life-giving source for others. The NRSV adopts this interpretation in its text: "As the scripture has said,' Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water'" (Jn 7:38). Koester observes that throughout the gospel John's symbols have two levels of meaning. They tell us primarily about Jesus, and in second place they tell us something about discipleship. It is therefore best to see

[9] Taken from Henry Wansbrough, ed., *New Jerusalem Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1985).

the two interpretations as an example of this; they are not alternatives but are complementary.[10]

Finally, an explicit link is made between the giving of the Spirit and the glorification of Jesus, his returning to the Father through being "lifted up" when the "hour" comes. It is then that the Spirit and the new life the Spirit brings become available to the believer. Jesus' words point back to what he said to the Samaritan woman, and forward to the piercing of his side on Calvary.

It is here that the theme of water reaches its climax. There are two references to water in this profoundly symbolic Calvary narrative: the thirst of Jesus, and the water flowing from his pierced side. "After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfil the scripture), 'I am thirsty.' A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, 'It is finished.' Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit" (Jn 19:28-30).

Once again Jesus acknowledges his thirst, this time brought about by his intense suffering and dehydration as death approaches. That is the word. But his thirsting also carries a symbolic significance. It may indicate his longing to return to the Father. It may express his intention to drink the cup of suffering which he mentioned in the garden (see Jn 18:11), his consuming desire to fulfil the Father's will, his yearning for the world's salvation. In the opinion of some scholars we are meant to understand that, now that the "hour" has come, Jesus is thirsting to complete his saving mission and fulfil the Father's will precisely by giving the Spirit.

[10] Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 13-14, 199.

Two arguments are brought forward in support of this position. The first is based on the literary device known as parallelism. The statement that Jesus is aware that all is finished is in parallel with his word tha "it is finished" (Jn 19:30). His words "I thirst" (Jn 19:28) is in parallel with the statement that he handed over the Spirit. He thirsts to bestow the Spirit. The other argument stems from the presence of misunderstanding in the text, a literary technique which we have already met. Jesus speaks about his thirst. The soldiers take this literally at face value and, with a touch of genuine sympathy, respond by offering him a drink of the poor quality wine they have with them. The deeper meaning of his thirst Jesus indicates not by words, but by the action of bowing his head and handing over the Spirit.

This interpretation is supported by the way in which the evangelist describes the death of Jesus: "he handed over the spirit" (Jn 19:30). The term *pneuma* can mean breath or wind or spirit, and elsewhere in the gospel, as we have seen, John exploits the possibilities of these various meanings. Often the phrasing is rendered as a euphemistic way of stating that he died: "he breathed his last," "he breathed out his life," "he gave up his spirit." But the terms employed convey a deeper significance, indicating that Jesus completes his task, his mission, by bowing his head towards his mother and the beloved disciple at the foot of the cross and handing over to them the Holy Spirit. They are representative believers, the nucleus of the new covenant community, the new people of God, the Church. Now that he is uplifted and glorified, he can bestow the Spirit, who slakes our human thirsting and bestows the gift of new life, as the narrator indicated during the feast of Tabernacles.

The final words of the Johannine Jesus, "It is finished," ring out as a triumphant cry of victory, signifying "mission accomplished." Throughout the gospel narrative Jesus is deeply aware that he "has come" or "is sent" from above with a task

to fulfil. Mission is at the core of his identity. In every situation he is bent on fulfilling the Father's will (see Jn 4:34; 5:36; 6:38; 17:4). The coming of the "hour" provides the context for the completion of his life's work, his final surrender in love.

After the death of Jesus the issue of purification, broached at the beginning of the Pilate scene, again arises. To obviate the danger of defilement at Passover time, it is essential that the criminals should die quickly and their corpses be removed before sunset. The religious authorities prevail on Pilate to dispatch his soldiers to facilitate this by breaking their legs. To their surprise they find that Jesus is already dead, and so: "Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out" (Jn 19:34).

The flow of blood and water confirms that Jesus is indeed dead. But it also points to the fulfilment of his Tabernacles' proclamation. The water gushing from within his body symbolizes the gift of the Spirit. There is a line of continuity between his thirst on the cross, his handing over the Spirit, and the flow of "living water." There is continuity also between the flow of blood from the heart of the dead Jesus and the self-giving service of his ministry, his love to the end and the utmost, his surrender to the Father, all summed up in his "It is accomplished."[11] Paradoxically, new life, "eternal life," becomes available through his death. His body is like the wilderness rock; it is the temple from which life-giving waters emerge in abundance, as Ezekiel foretold (Ex 17:6; Num 20:11; Ezek 47:1-12). A long Christian tradition sees in this flow of blood and water what Dorothy Lee calls "the icon of sacramental life."[12] It is through the sacrament of baptism (through water

[11] Ignace de la Potterie, *The Hour of Jesus* (Middlegreen, England: St. Paul Publications, 1989), 172-174.

[12] Lee, *Flesh and Glory,* 82. See also C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to John* (London, SPCK, 1978), 557; Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 243.

and Spirit) that we come to share the life of God, and through the Eucharist that this life is sustained (Jn 6:53-56).

Two Symbolic Gestures

There are other symbols, like the vine, or the shepherd, but to conclude, allow me to dwell briefly on two symbolic gestures.

The first is the incident after the raising of Lazarus from death to life, when, at the celebratory meal provided by the family for Jesus and his disciples at the beginning of Passover week, Mary anoints Jesus' feet with costly perfume made of nard, and then wipes them with her hair. This self-forgetful and generous action is an expression of her gratitude to Jesus, her deep love for him. In response to Judas' criticism of her action, Jesus speaks his word, which reveals its significance, as it is caught up in the mystery of his self-giving love on Calvary: "She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial" (Jn 12:7).

The second gesture is, I believe, closely linked; it is Jesus' action in washing the feet of the disciples as the Last Supper begins. The episode is introduced as follows: "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (Jn 13:1). The Greek phrase used here (*eis telos*) means both to the end of life and to the extreme, the utmost. The action is clear: Jesus does what only a slave would do, wash someone's feet; Peter is appalled by it, he can't cope with what is happening. This washing, this act of humble service, devotion and hospitality, performed for disciples who in their fragility and ordinariness do not understand, one of whom is a traitor, is symbolic. It is a prophetic gesture. It points forward to Jesus' coming humiliating death in response to the Father's saving design. It is a clear indication of his self-giving and his unconditional loving to the end and the uttermost. Jesus' word on all this is: "If I have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet" (Jn 13:14). Jesus, the self-giving servant, reveals

what God is like, and what it means to be a human being and to be a disciple.

So the most powerful word of God is Jesus hanging on the cross.

Talking to Nicodemus earlier in the narrative, Jesus says: "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him'" (Jn 3:14-17).

This is the heart of the fourth gospel. God speaks through the action of sending /giving his Son, His only Son. God does so because he loves the world. Its purpose is clarified in two parallel phrases, negative and positive: that we may not perish, not be condemned; but that we may be saved, we may come to share the life of God "eternal life." This life becomes available when Jesus is lifted up on Calvary; and that being lifted up is the supreme revelation of God's love, and the love of Jesus the Shepherd. Word and action coalesce.

Having considered God's word to us, spoken through some symbols in John, it appears apt to conclude with a very brief word concerning responses.

Response

Usually, when one speaks to someone, a response is expected. We all prefer two-way communication, though silence can be a response, quite a strong response! So another key aspect of the gospel is how people respond to the Word of God enfleshed in Jesus. It is a facet of all the action stories and words of Jesus.

The theme begins in the Prologue: "He was in the world, and the world 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. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God" (Jn 1:10-12).

There are always two options: to believe or accept, on the one hand, or not to believe and to reject, on the other. In speaking God's word to us today, as in his own day, the evangelist is trying to elicit a response of faith and love, deeper faith and stronger love, which lead to a fuller aliveness. And that positive response is shown by our adopting Jesus' mindset and way: self-giving service, loving one another as he loves us.