

The Slow Work of God
21st August to 25th September

Introduction to the Series.

This is a longer introduction than usual. Please re-read this introduction a few times during this series so that you and those you study with are able to appreciate how the information and perspective expressed in this introduction is demonstrated in each of the weeks of this series.

We are very attracted to the fast work of God: The instant healing from cancer, the immediate turn around in the behaviour of an addict, the quick answer to prayer. These certainly happen and there are many testimonies that are true. But this series is about the other work of God, the slow work of God. We know this is also true, and there are also testimonies to share here too. We are not attracted to this way of God as much as we are attracted to God's fast work. But from personal experience we know that most of God's work is slow, steady, loving, gentle and patient. We know God is Love and that love is patient, kind, slow to anger and doesn't force itself.

Part of the good news of this series is that it reminds us that God is always at work. Sometimes we are surrounded by failures, regress, setbacks, bad news – and we think that God has perhaps gone to pay attention to others and left us to stew in our own juices. But this series will remind us that God is always at work, always injecting the present moment with possibilities for better choices and a disciple's path forward. This series will help us to cooperate with God's slow work.

This slow work of God has also become known as "the principle of gradualness" and is found as an important key to understand and interpret the Gospels, especially the Gospel of John. There we will discover many who did not immediately become faithful disciples but rather journeyed there over time. John offers pen-portraits in his gospel of various characters who change and grow by degrees, from ignorance to truth; From confusion to conviction; from darkness to light.

Let us remind ourselves now that this will also help us in our relationships with other people and even situations (like the South African crisis). We will learn that God is working gradually with them too.

History has many examples of God's slow and gradual work. The Israelites spent 40 years in the wilderness; later their exile in Babylon lasted for 50 years; In Isaiah 7.8 Isaiah shows God saying that it will take God 65 years to deal with the Ephraimites; Greek and Roman persecution also lasted for decades; Zimbabwe is a country that continues to deteriorate, whilst for decades, people say 'Things can't carry on like this'. Our world continues to overstrain the ecosystem and shows very few signs of repentance.

Even more than examples in human history is the work of God as Creator. We live in a universe that is about 13.6 billion years old. We live on a planet of so much life, and so much complexity. It took earth about 6 billion years to get to this point. This is the slow and steady work of God!

Gradualness is part of the human condition. It is about the way humans learn, understand and progress intellectually, morally, psychologically and spiritually. It makes sense that God wants us

to properly learn new ways, to understand them and adopt them, to make them our own. This takes time patience and understanding. These qualities (patience, understanding and time) are qualities that are evident in Jesus' interactions with various characters in John's gospel.

The work of the Holy Spirit is at the heart of this journey. John 16.13 reminds us that "The Spirit guides us toward the entire truth".

We are also helped in facing really complex situations, or situations that have many limitations, where things are not 'black' and 'white'. In these situations, there are perhaps no actions or decisions that are completely right or wrong, because every option is a mixture. Perhaps the next step is just a small step of growth. This small step can be greatly pleasing to God who is interested in who we are becoming as we face the complexities of life.

Why John wrote a Gospel

John declares his aims and intentions more than once, and they all involve us, his readers today, as well as, of course, the community of his own time and every generation since. John writes his gospel so that Christians might *go on believing* in Jesus the Christ, the Word made flesh. But John knows that believing does not happen in a vacuum. His additional aim, therefore, is to strengthen the commitment to faith in Jesus during periods of persecution, exclusion, alienation and transition. This all speaks to supporting the slow work of God in all people in every era. See John 19:35, 20:31, 21:24.

Specifically, John is writing for Jewish Christians in Ephesus who have been persecuted by leaders of the Jewish Synagogue. Their lives have been disorientated because they have been kicked out of the synagogue and may no longer turn to it for direction. They must now find their way forward outside of traditional and official Judaism. John was helping his sisters and brothers in Christ to let go of their past and reorient themselves towards a future where they would experience worship of a God in a new and universal way 'in spirit and truth'.

Jesus as Teacher in John's Gospel

John has a very special way of presenting Jesus as teacher. He has a strong use of **narrative**, i.e. he tells stories. There is nothing like a good story to get people to leave their comfort zones and put themselves into other situations, all the while something is going on in their own thoughts and emotions. Just as in the synoptic gospels Jesus teaches through parables, so in John's gospel, narrative also has a special place, not so much in Jesus' made-up stories which the synoptic parables are, as in the stories in which he himself is the key role player. It is not too much of a stretch to suggest that, while the synoptics engage in fictional stories (the sower, the prodigal son, etc), John engages in **biographical sketches** in which Jesus himself plays an active part: Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the man born blind and many others.

John's narratives also have an element of the **dramatic** - he could have been a playwright, as we shall see when we examine the narrative in John 9. John is also influenced by the love of **philosophy** and **rhetoric** common to his cultural milieu. This includes the use of **symbolism** to represent larger ideas or qualities that are difficult to articulate in plain language.

Symbolism is, of course not exclusive to bygone days. There's a wonderful contemporary example. The renowned interpretive dancer, Martha Graham, after one of her shows, was asked by reporters what her dance meant. She replied, "Darlings, if I could have put it into words, I wouldn't have danced it!". We all agree that there are some things that words cannot convey. John knows this too, and so he makes use of literary devices, like metaphor, symbolism and irony.

Misunderstanding, as John uses it in relation to Jesus' teaching methods, seems to be one of Jesus own preferred pedagogical methods, judging by its frequency. We are talking here about double pun, the sort of double meaning that even well educated people like Nicodemus had to deal with. In John's gospel, Jesus intends to use words that are open to at least two perfectly reasonable interpretations. He uses a word one way; his dialogue partner takes it another way. Initial misinterpretation serves Jesus' purpose as he leads Nicodemus, for example, from confusion to clarity. It almost seems as though he deliberately allows Nicodemus to make a mistake. As the saying goes, you learn from your mistakes.

Finally, for Jesus as teacher, **dialogue** is vital. Admittedly, sometimes Jesus does seem to monopolize the conversation as dialogue becomes discourse, with Jesus giving full flight to his work of teaching. In these exchanges, Jesus is often the instigator and can be very provocative. He pushes those he encounters out of their comfort zones and challenges them to be open to God working in their midst through him. Some people accept his role immediately. Others are closed to Jesus' challenge; while still others take some time to rise to the challenges. Regardless Jesus is always open to dialogue and intent on sharing the truth of who he is.

I have taken the title of this series from a poem written by the great paleontologist and theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J. (1881-1955):

Trust in the Slow Work of God

Above all, trust in the slow work of God
We are quite naturally impatient in everything
to reach the end without delay
We should like to skip the intermediate stages.
We are impatient of being on the way to something
unknown, something new. And yet it is the law of all progress
that it is made by passing through
some stages of instability and
that it may take a very long time.

And so I think it is with you.
your ideas mature gradually – let them grow,
let them shape themselves, without undue haste. Don't try to force them on,
as though you could be today what time
(that is to say, grace and circumstances
acting on your own good will)
will make of you tomorrow.

Only God could say what this new spirit gradually forming within you will be. Give Our Lord the benefit of believing that his hand is leading you, and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete.

Further notes

John Wessels has put this series together with the help of the book *“Become Love: Gradual Growth and Transformation from John to Francis”* by Larry Kaufmann.

I really pray that this booklet will be a useful tool.

NICODEMUS ON A LONG LEARNING CURVE

21st August

Psalm for the week: Psalm 90

A Guide for your Devotions:

John 3:1-21

The principle of gradualness remains our quest as we pay attention to the teaching method of Jesus and the learning curve on which he takes his disciples. The story of Nicodemus epitomizes this. Yet, in contrast to most other characters whose stories are told within the framework of a single chapter in John, we find Nicodemus in three separate chapters. He fails his first exam in chapter 3, does a supplementary exam in Chapter 7, and only graduates in chapter 19.

Enter Nicodemus in 3:1 who, as a pharisee, thinks he knows everything. Or does he? Maybe he is not so sure. What made him come to Jesus “by night”, symbolizing not only the darkness of his faith but also his fear of being found out by meeting with Jesus (verse 2)? What drew him, what attracted him to Jesus? Was it his intellectual curiosity as a teacher? Was it perhaps a sense of emptiness in his own life, emptiness despite being loyal to the laws and structures of his religion? Or are these some of the aspects of “night” in the darkness of Nicodemus’ life as he moves towards the Light?

Note the phrase that is sometimes translated “born again” and other times “born from above”. It is an example of Jesus’ use of double pun. The single Greek word which John uses is *anathen*, but it carries the double meaning of “again” and “from above”. Respecting John's intentions in using that word, it is helpful therefore to include both senses simultaneously in our translations - “born again, from above”.

Nicodemus is highly educated and works from the head not the heart. He is more at home in logic and calculation than in poetry and metaphor. By natural disposition as well as training, he is bound to respond in a literal way to the statement of Jesus about being “born again, from above”. It is this difficulty which will help him grow - even if it is gradual. For now, Nicodemus does not get it - he is wedded to “groupthink”. He is more at home in the conventions of the Pharisees and the Sanhedrin than in the challenge of thinking for himself. “How can this be?” are the last words he utters in the John 3 encounter.

But let us give him credit where credit is due. He surely would not have come to Jesus unless he had some modicum of open mindedness. There is a deeper search behind his academic questions, and perhaps it will take the painful death of the man he called “rabbi teacher” to cure his intellectual sclerosis.

John 7:40-52

Nicodemus, a pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, shows himself in this passage to be a person of integrity and principle. It would even appear that he has started to break ranks and is able to express a personal opinion in contradiction to the dogmatism of his peers. In this little narrative John has made the point that Nicodemus is still on a progressive journey of faith.

John 19:8-42

Scholars are not in agreement that this passage implies that Nicodemus has arrived at true faith in Jesus. He has not formally declared in words his belief in Jesus as Messiah. However, I suggest we adopt the maxim that says 'actions speak louder than words'. This action put him at risk with his fellow Pharisees and Sanhedrin who would almost certainly discipline him. Or, perhaps his faith in Jesus is not openly declared because he has some journey to still take. Perhaps the scene reflects his remarkable progress - but hints at more to come.

That John stretches the Nicodemus narrative over chapters 3, 7 and 19 and not in one self-contained story, points to Nicodemus' relatively long journey. Reminding ourselves that our aim is to interpret the process of growth, learning and change in various characters whom John introduces to us, we can confidently assert that Nicodemus fits the profile. We have watched him searching, questioning, doubting, debating, all part of his gradual transformation when coming into relationship with Christ. He has indeed been on a long learning curve.

Once you have read the passages of scripture and the commentary recorded above, reflect on these questions (feel free to raise your own questions for discussion):

1. What is helpful for you personally about this study in relation to your life-long journey with questions of faith, doubts about doctrine, and intellectual problems?
2. Which of the Sunday services did you attend or watch this past Sunday? What was the main point/s of the sermon?
3. Which part of the message touched you on a personal level?

Work during the week

Take Nicodemus with you this week and know that he is your brother in the journey of questions, doubts and intellectual struggles.

THE SAMARITAN WOMAN AT THE WELL
28TH AUGUST

Psalm for the week: Psalm 38

A Guide for your Devotions:

John 4:1-42

The story of the Samaritan woman in John chapter 4 is a classic example of the principle of gradualness in John. Gradually and gently Jesus leads her from darkness to light, from fear to freedom, from ignorance to insight as he guides the conversation patiently through one obstacle, one objection, one barrier, one decoy, one excuse after the other. He engages the woman in conversation gently stretching her mind and leading her gradually to faith and discipleship. In her growing relationship with Jesus she moves from a life of pretense, emptiness and embarrassment to a joy she never knew possible.

Let us ask ourselves, what is one of the main handicaps to learning, to growing, to change and personal transformation? Baggage! We use the term for people stuck in their ways - "they've got baggage". Thus, "carrying a lot of baggage" is probably how we would describe the Samaritan woman, not just for the bucket on her head but, at a more personal level, for her inner brokenness and her moral and psychological burdens.

Status in the community, racial, religious and gender prejudice, purity laws and a complicated past all form part of her baggage. The disciples seem to have baggage too.

Once you have read the passages of scripture and the commentary recorded above, reflect on these questions (feel free to raise your own questions for discussion):

1. Are you willing to share what some of your baggage is?
2. What is helpful about the way Jesus deals with the woman's and disciples' baggage?
3. How can this 'way' of Jesus help you as you journey forward with baggage?
4. Which of the Sunday services did you attend or watch this past Sunday? What was the main point/s of the sermon?
5. Which part of the message touched you on a personal level?

Work during the week

Take this woman with you this week and know that she is your sister in the journey of baggage.

THE MAN BORN BLIND

4th September

Psalm for the week: Psalm 73

A Guide for your Devotions:

John 9

The secret to the narrative of John 9 is, as we already know for all of John's gospel, his prologue which proclaims in powerful and poetic terms that the *Light* has come into this world, but that many prefer to remain in the dark. This finds an echo in John 8:12 "I am the light of the world; whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life." The same echo reverberates again in John 9:5 "as long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." So, the prologue and chapter 8 with the respective themes of light, develop a necessary background to chapter 9. It is clear that we are dealing with the themes of light, truth, blindness, sight at both physical and spiritual levels.

In chapter 9, John is giving us more than a theology of light in Christ. He shows how Jesus pushes people beyond superficial answers within their closed systems, to new openness to how God is acting through him in the present.

Note how the man born blind comes to faith and knowledge of Jesus gradually. Beginning with stability that is both physical and spiritual, he grows from newfound physical sites; to spiritual insight which takes the form of a progressive understanding of who Jesus is; to full submission.

Yet while the man is gradually having his eyes opened to the truth about Jesus, the Pharisees are becoming more stubborn in their refusal to see the truth.

Growth in faith is an unfolding, gradual process, the task of a lifetime. It doesn't matter if we cannot understand everything at once. It might be enough to say with the men "I don't really know who this Jesus is. All I know is that I once was blind but now I see."

Note that in this instance and also the woman at the well, their names are not given. Leaving someone nameless, is John's way of suggesting that the character represents you and me and all John's audiences throughout the centuries.

It is interesting that John's narrative did not spend much time on the actual miracle of healing. It is clear that he is more interested in the various dialogues that follow. Each serves an important purpose. There are 8 dialogues in chapter 9:

- 1) Jesus and the disciples, 1-5
- 2) Jesus and the man born blind, 6-7
- 3) The man and his neighbors, 8-12
- 4) The man and the Pharisees, 13-17
- 5) the Pharisees and the man's parents, 18-23

- 6) the Pharisees and the man, 24-34
- 7) Jesus and the man, 35- 38
- 8) Jesus and the Pharisees, 39-41 (and beyond verse 41 into chapter 10)

Once you have read the passages of scripture and the commentary recorded above, reflect on these questions (feel free to raise your own questions for discussion):

1. Did you note how the man born blind came to faith and knowledge gradually and in stages? (see verses 7, 10, 17, 33, 38)
2. What do you learn from the dialogues?
3. Which of the Sunday services did you attend or watch this past Sunday? What was the main point/s of the sermon?
4. Which part of the message touched you on a personal level?

Work during the week

Take this blind man with you into this week as your companion as you seek light and leading from Jesus.

Also, read John 13 to 17 this week in preparation for the next lesson and this coming Sunday's sermon.

THE FAREWELL DISCOURSES

11th September

Psalm for the week: Psalm 113

A Guide for your Devotions:

John 13-17

In the extended farewell conversation Jesus has with his disciples, he warns them of his own impending suffering and adds that they must expect the same for themselves one day. "I tell you this now before it happens" (13:19, repeated in 14:29). "If the world hates you, remember that it hated me before you" (15:18). The teacher is preparing his disciples.

The first thing to bear in mind is that John stays in narrative gear. That might not be so obvious as one discourse leads into another. Nevertheless, consider the setting. Jesus has gathered his immediate circle of disciples and "friends" - as he now calls them - around him (15:15). It is an intimate moment yet fraught with sadness, to say nothing of the sense of reality at seeing the writing on the wall. Jesus' "hour" has finally come, that is, his "day" of glory when he is "lifted up" in the two fold meaning of both cross and resurrection. It is the *Kairos* moment completing once for all the fullness of revelation of divine love. So, he continues to tell a story, but this time he allows us, his audience, into the sacred space where a teacher bids farewell to his students.

We will look at Peter's character next week - this week we focus on the teaching-learning dynamic between Jesus and all the disciples collectively.

The foot washing narrative is significant as a teaching moment. John's brief narrative of the foot washing ends with Jesus putting his garment back on and returning to his place at the table. No doubt a good moment of silence passed as this all took place, giving the disciples time to ponder on what had just happened. Then they hear the question put to them by Jesus, "do you know what I've done to you?".

"Do you get it?" is any teacher's primary concern - "did you understand? Were you paying attention?" it is a neatly contained teaching moment between Jesus and his disciples that begins with a gesture, moves to a question, provides a succinct explanation, makes a comment about teaching by example, and ends with a blessing.

Note that in the blessing "if you know these things, blessed are you if you do them." Note the conditional "if you do them". Knowledge of the truth is not enough for blessing; It must be put into action. It is *Praxis* (faith and love in action) that is blessed.

John now moves on to the longer discourses, chapters 14 to 17. In these, while Jesus is the focus of attention, speaking as others are listening, there are nevertheless key interventions by different disciples. The questions they pose or the confusion they express are vital to the learning process that John wants to convey. One can see Jesus' work of moving each one on in their faith: Thomas, Phillip, Judas (not Iscariot) and other disciples.

Reflect on these questions (feel free to raise your own questions for discussion):

1. How has your journey been of personally “getting it” in response to Jesus’ foot-washing? How has it affected your way of life? What do you still need to show that you “got it”? Yes, we will never “arrive”, but what is your next step for growth in this?
2. What did you learn from at least one of the following character’s encounter with Jesus: Thomas, Philip, Judas (not Iscariot), other disciples?
3. Which of the Sunday services did you attend or watch this past Sunday? What was the main point/s of the sermon?
4. Which part of the message touched you on a personal level?

Work during the week

Which character would you like to take with you this week as a reminder of the difficulty of a life of service?

TRINITY 70TH BIRTHDAY SERVICE
18th September

Use this week to reflect on the Birthday service and on loose ends, questions you have in this series.

PETER, THE ROCK: Slippery Slope to a Firm Foundation
25th September

Psalm for the week: Psalm 131

A Guide for your Devotions:

Among the characters to whom John introduces us, Peter is perhaps the one whose progress is the most gradual. For one thing, his narrative spends the entire gospel, starting at chapter 1 (1:41) and ending 2 verses short of the final verse of the final chapter (21:23). But it is not so much the length of his story that is significant, as the paradoxes of his personality and the fits and starts of his relationship with Jesus, that mark Peter out as the doyen of gradual transformation.

John 1:35-42

Peter's journey starts with his naming. The act of naming is itself transformative. It is never neutral. The fisherman "Simon" would have to grow into his new name "Peter", changing his base from a boat on water, to a rock on which the church will be built. It is perhaps consoling for us to see that generally the catalyst for Peter's growing, paradoxically, will be his failure. His experience of forgiveness, reconciliation and love from the one he had forsaken will be what ultimately seals his final commitment.

In chapter 6, we see that Peter has a leadership role in the community of the disciples because he answers the question "do you also wish to go away?" with the words, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the holy one of God" (6:68 - 69).

John 13-18

Jesus warned Peter of his potential cowardice. In failing his Lord, Peter will not be far behind Judas. The rupture in his relationship with Jesus will be almost as radical, but, as we shall see, the healing of the breach of trust is going to be very deep. It is indeed distressing to hear the one who said, "Lord, to whom shall we go?" (6:68) now going away from Jesus, over to the other side. John, without ambiguity, twice situates Peter "with them", i.e. on the other side (18:18 and 18:25).

Peter objects to Jesus washing his feet (13:6). More pertinent than Peter's objections, however, is his lack of understanding. He really doesn't get it. He lacks insight into Jesus' motivation for behaving like a "slave" when he is in truth a "Lord and master". He lacks openness to the

revelation of God's ways in the words and deeds of Jesus. It's Jesus - ever the teacher – who makes allowances for what Peter cannot understand “now”, assuring him that “afterwards” he will understand (13:19). What happens between the “now” and the “afterwards” is of course “the hour” of Jesus, when Jesus is lifted up in Pascal mystery. Peter, preeminently, will understand and believe abundantly only after the triumphant hour of Jesus.

After the giving of the new commandment in 13:34-35, Peter obstinately insists on following Jesus now even though Jesus has said he cannot. Jesus and Peter are on separate wavelengths - Jesus is talking about going to the Father.

John 21:1-23

Peter says, quite simply, “I'm going fishing” (3). This is not just because he is bored, or running short of cash, or needing something for supper that night. John is suggesting to us that Peter, in the imperfection of his resurrection faith, is taking a step backwards by reverting to familiar securities of his past. The law of gradual illness, as we've seen before from that often has people, including ourselves, feeling nostalgic for old comforts, focusing less on the future and more on the past. Note that he goes fishing at night - a strong symbol in John's gospel. Just like Judas who went out into the night. It is always a metaphor of the deeper reality of distance and separation from the Light of the world. Peter is still in the dark, metaphorically and literally. The fishing trip is a failure.

Jesus addresses Peter as “Simon, son of John”, which is Peter's pre-discipleship name. Jesus wants Peter to recall and reintegrate his longer journey of discipleship which began with his naming, not simply repair recent damage done. Clearly, the main reason for Jesus demanding a threefold confession of love is commensurate with Peter's threefold denial of Jesus. Forgiveness is rooted in love. Each act of denial is forgiven in each declaration of love. We note also that Jesus accepts that Peter cannot say yes to loving him with *agape* love but only the love of *philo*. *Agape* love is a much higher form of love than *philo*. Jesus meets Peter at his own level of readiness. He knows that Peter will grow into the deeper, sacrificial meaning of love, the meaning which Jesus portrayed in his farewell discourse. Indeed, Jesus predicts that this is exactly what will happen when Peter finds himself stretching out his hands, having someone else tie a girdle around him and taking him where he would rather not go.

Once you have read the passages of scripture and the commentary recorded above, reflect on these questions (feel free to raise your own questions for discussion):

1. Peter needed to live up to his new name. Can you live up to being called a ‘disciple’? What has that journey been like?
2. When is obstinacy a good thing and when is it problematic? Do you need to learn to be more determined or less obstinate?
3. In what ways do you look back nostalgically to easier days you had more control over? How can Jesus help you face the future as a disciple serving his Kingdom?
4. Which of the Sunday services did you attend or watch this past Sunday? What was the main point/s of the sermon?

5. Which part of the message touched you on a personal level?

Work during the week

Take Peter with you this week and learn from the lessons he learned.