

On the way to FAITH: Personal Encounters with Jesus in John's Gospel

Ken R Manley

Sydney: Morling Press, 2013. ISBN 978-0-9922755-1-8. Pp xiv+113. Rrp AUD\$15.00pbk

When I first became a Christian I wanted to devour the Bible to learn more about this Jesus I had encountered. Now that I have been a Christian for three decades and wanting to keep growing in my faith – but am still influenced in competing directions by my surrounding culture and my personal ego and drives – I still want to encounter Jesus in fresh ways. I return to the gospels to be surprised and have my eyes opened to what really is good news – for me and for others with whom I share my journey. I reckon its time for me to return to the intimacy and warmth of the gospel of John, and so I have been eagerly looking forward to reading *On the way to FAITH*.

The author Ken Manley is a Baptist pastor, lecturer and the leading Baptist church historian in Australia. He taught at the Baptist College in Adelaide, at Morling College in Sydney, and was Principal of Whitley College. His two-volume tour de force comprehensively explores the story of Baptists in Australia: *From Woolloomooloo to 'Eternity': A History of Australian Baptists* (Paternoster 2006) and he was one of the contributing editors of *Five Barley Loaves: Australian Baptists in Global Mission 1864-2010* (Mosaic 2013). In between his scholarship and semi-retirement, he has served as interim pastor of Kew Baptist Church, where he preached through John and his congregation encouraged him to share the gold of his teaching.

On the way to FAITH offers 12 messages from the gospel of John, and the experience of all different sorts of people with Jesus. We see Jesus surprise his mother and friends, offer grace to the blind and the condemned, and respond to religious leaders and imperial rulers. As a model preacher, Manley addresses live issues of forgiveness, grief, doubt, suffering, generosity, witness and obedience. He draws on poetry and literature, contemporary songs and movies. He invites his readers into the stories – to imagine themselves there and be surprised by a fresh understanding of the human Jesus.

Here are two of my favourite encounters and a paragraph each of Manley's commentary. Firstly, Jesus' encounter with the unhappy woman of Samaria (John 4:3-32), challenges us to overcome cultural boundaries and expectations:

How easily we still categorise people or reduce them to stereotypes – ethnics, asylum seekers, refugees, bogans, homeless, gays. We find it far easier to witness to our own type of people rather than risk genuine engagement across ethnic or class divides. We are so often like the disciples who were clearly incredulous when they returned from the town with some food and saw Jesus

with this woman. The possibilities of each life are overlooked when we drop people into such labelled boxes. (32)

Secondly, I was inspired by Jesus' advocacy for a condemned woman (John 7:53-8:11) and turning the tables on the hypocrisy of her accusers:

Every day we make decisions to throw the first stone or to drop it and forgive. The angry crowd could have thrown that stone without a moment's notice because all they saw was the sin and not the person they were attacking. It is like some people who every day throw stones at a prostitute, a homosexual, a drug addict, or an alcoholic. Stone after stone they throw at these 'sins' and then one day their son or daughter comes to them and tells them that he or she is a prostitute, addicted to drugs, or a homosexual, or an alcoholic. They stand here with the stone in their hands but they can't throw the stone because now the 'sin' has a face, not any face, but their son's or daughter's face and they can't throw the rock. (43)

This is an accessible and warmly inviting book for preachers, small groups or any curious reader wanting a guide to explore John and open to meeting Jesus in new and fresh ways. It comes with small group questions (with Warren Stone's help), and classical artwork (Sheree Brugel's selection).

In our local church at AuburnLife, a neighbour to Kew where Ken Manley is a member, we teach and learn our way through a gospel for the first 3-6 months of each year. We want to recalibrate our lives as disciples and as a church around a fresh reading of the life of Jesus. For 5 years we have gone with the synoptic gospel of the year's lectionary – Matthew, Mark or Luke. Manley has whet my appetite for engaging freshly with John. I enjoyed reading *On the way to FAITH* this summer, and I look forward to revisiting it next summer as we prepare for a few months of encountering Jesus in John's Gospel.

Reviewer: *Darren Cronshaw is Mission Catalyst – Researcher with the Baptist Union of Victoria, pastor of AuburnLife, Honorary Research Associate of Whitley College (MCD University of Divinity) and Associate Professor in Missiology with Australian College of Ministries (SCD). He blogs at www.buv.com.au/witness/blogger/listings/darren-cronshaw Email: darren.cronshaw@bu.com.au*
