

What's the Word?

John 1:1-18

A sermon for the Season of Epiphany

In Hamlet Polonius comes to Hamlet and asks him: "What are you reading?" And Hamlet says: "Words, words, words." What are words?

The Gospel of John 1:1 states: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. John 1:14 reads: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only son of the Father." Two words are central, "Word" and "glory."

Before we take up "Word" and "glory," what do words, any words, mean? We all know the nursery rhyme "Humpty Dumpty":

*'Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall:
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
All the King's horses and all the King's men
Couldn't put Humpty together again.'*

At the end of the Nineteenth Century Lewis Carroll wrote *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. In *Through the Looking Glass* Carroll adapted this nursery rhyme for a conversation between Humpty Dumpty and Alice to take up the meaning of words. It goes like this:

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you **can** make words mean so many different things.'

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master — that's all."

Alice was too much puzzled to say anything; so after a minutes Humpty Dumpty began again: "They've a temper, some of them — particularly verbs: they're the proudest — adjectives you can do anything with, but not verbs — however, **I** can manage the whole lot of them! Impenetrability! That's what **I** say!"

"Would you tell me please," said Alice, "what that means?"

"Now you talk like a reasonable child," said Humpty Dumpty, looking very much pleased. "I meant by 'impenetrability' that we've had enough of that subject, and it would be just as well if you'd mention what you mean to do next, as I suppose you don't mean to stop here all the rest of your life."

"That's a great deal to make one word mean," Alice said in a thoughtful tone.

"When I make a word do a lot of work like that," said Humpty Dumpty, "I always pay extra for it."

"Oh!" said Alice. She was too much puzzled to make any other remark.

"Ah, you should see 'em come round me on a Saturday night," Humpty Dumpty went on, wagging his head gravely from side to side, "to get their wages, you know."

(Alice didn't venture to ask what he paid them with; and so you see I can't tell **you**.)"

The important lines are the three in the middle:

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"The question is," said Alice, "whether you **can** make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master — that's all."

We think: "A word means what I think it means, how I use it, how I experience and feel it to mean." How do words work?

Most of the time we assume that words are plain, simple, and self-evident. But words don't work that way. You may have been taught that words have a literal or a figurative meaning, or that they are denotative or connotative. But these distinctions break down.

Four illustrations: First, take the word "box." That can mean a container, and it can mean the sport of boxing. Or it can mean "boxing someone's ears," which is a kind of punishment. Or "boxing the compass," which is naming all 32 clockwise points of the compass in order. There are even more meanings of the word "box."

Second, the same is true for the word "cow." People will say: "A cow is a cow is a cow. Don't pretend that that herd of cattle over there is not a herd of cows." But if you go to Madagascar, you would see a herd of cattle, but all of their cattle have a fatty hump on their shoulders. Those are Zebu. If you shipped one of our cows to Madagascar, they would say: "That's not a cow!"

Third, if today I say to you: "I'll see you next Monday," that really means tomorrow. But a lot of people would say that tomorrow is "this Monday," and "next Monday" is eight days from now. How words are used can be confusing.

And fourth, an example from the Bible. Psalm 114:4: "The mountains skipped like rams; the hills like little lambs." Should we take those words in their plain, simple meaning? Was there an earthquake? No. The psalmist is expressing how the earth trembles with joy at the presence of the Lord.

Translating is even more complicated. We do manage to learn other languages, but it takes insight, imagination, and work to really hear what someone is saying and not merely transpose words from one language into another.

Matt 26:41 says: "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak." Someone put this verse in a translation machine, that is, translated it into another language and then back to English and it became: "The whiskey is good, but the meat is underdone."

In the Gospel of John the birth narrative is John 1:14: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

When the Apostle Paul uses the word "flesh," he does not mean "the meat on the bone." He means that force which is against the Spirit. As he writes in Galatians 5:17: "For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh." (Sometimes when he is quoting something else, he doesn't follow this usage.)

When the Gospel of John says "flesh," it means "the meat on the bones." The Word became a human being with flesh and blood and bones.

John 1:14 reads: ". . . dwelt among us," but that's not what the Greek says. It should be "The Word became flesh and tented among us." But modern translations do not use "tented" because that would imply that Jesus was only here for a short visit.

"Word" is the first word. The second word is "glory."

John 1:14b states: "We have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father." What is "glory"?

Today we often think of "glory" in terms of Christmas hymns such as "Angels from the Realms of Glory," and Easter hymns such as "Thine is the Glory." Glory is a powerful way of saying "triumph." Someone has said that we should spell glory: Glow-ry. There is that halo, that nimbus that shines out from behind the head of Jesus in many paintings.

Humpty Dumpty had something to say about "glory." Just ahead of the conversation already cited, there is this exchange:

[Humpty Dumpty says]: "There's glory for you!"

"I don't know what you mean by glory," Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously: "Of course you don't – until I tell you. I meant – 'There's a nice knock-down argument for you!'"

"But 'glory' doesn't mean a nice knock-down argument," Alice objected.

Then Humpty famously says: "When I use a word, it means what I choose it to mean, no more and no less"

The word "**glory**" is found throughout the Bible, but in the Gospel of John it is found in John 1:14 and three other places.

John 12: 23: "The hour has come for the Son of man to be **glorified**."

John 12:28: "For this purpose I have come to this hour. 'Father, **glorify** thy name. Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have **glorified** it, and I will **glorify** it again.'"

John 17:1 in the high priestly prayer: "Father, the hour has come; **glorify** thy Son that the Son may **glorify** thee."

The "cross" = "glory"! That's counter-intuitive. The cross is a scandal and foolishness. Paul knows that. In 1 Cor 1:18-25 Paul writes about the cross as a scandal and foolishness. He ends up in 1 Cor 1:28-29 with glory and boasting: "He chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might **boast** in the presence of God." The word "boast" is also "glory." There is nothing on our part that we can glory/boast about. And then in 1 Cor 1:31, quoting Jeremiah 9:23-24, Paul writes: "Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord" (also 2 Cor 10:17).

What does that mean for you and me?

It means something very specific. It means God is changing us. In 2 Corinthians 3:18 Paul writes: "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the **glory** of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of **glory** to another." Note the present tense: We are being changed.

Then 2 Cor 4:3: "Even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing." Those who are outside of Christ can't see it; they don't know it. It means nothing to them except foolishness and scandal.

Paul continues in 2 Cor 4:6: "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of the darkness,' who has shown in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the **glory** of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

The **glory** is the Crucified One. That's the **glory**. Amen