Introduction to reading John's Gospel

It will come as no surprise to point out that John's Gospel is very different in style to the other three. Scholarship has helped us understand that for strictly historical material, writings that required the minimum of subjective interpretation, we would not go to the Fourth Gospel (John). Its religious value is what has made it one of the more significant writings of the New Testament. It was written in the 90's AD, long after the destruction of the Temple in 70 and as the Church is being forced to deal with heresies that were distorting the true nature of the person, mission and ministry of Jesus. Readers today need to keep in mind that when listening to what the Spirit is saying through the Gospel of John, the bare historical facts of the life of Jesus are a secondary interest.

We read in the Synoptic Gospels narratives tied to history

If we are looking for the oldest and the most faithful traditions about Jesus, we would go to the Synoptic Gospels. These Gospels coincide, overlap, diverge, confirm and contradict one another in a way that is at first simply perplexing. But out of these curious interrelations of the three it has been possible to deduce a gradually increasing mass of probable conclusions about the earlier sources upon which they rest. They reflect the traditions about Jesus, the treasured remembrances going back to the time of Jesus himself, to actual events from his ministry among them.

The Evangelist's chief motive is not historical. He is more a biographer, a biographer whose aim is not to convey facts, but to impart spiritual Truth. In choosing the narratives to be added to his gospel, his selection was made in the light of his intent to lead the reader to 'life' through faith: *These signs are recorded so that you may believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and believing may have life through his name* (John 20:31). This is partially true also of the Synoptics. They, too, portray Jesus not merely as seen by the outward eye, but as interpreted by the Spirit and appropriated by faith. And indeed, all true history must involve a subjective as well as an objective element. But in the Fourth Gospel, the reflective element is less unconsciously and more creatively and artistically present.

The Gospel thus becomes a kind of kind of 'historical sermon' which reminds us of the later Jewish homiletic method known as 'Haggadah' in which religious teaching is driven home by the allegorizing of sacred history.

The Gospel may be well described as *a moralising meditation* on the drama of Christ's life. Indeed, the author is essentially a dramatist rather than a historian. The earthly life of Jesus in this Gospel appears as a dramatic interlude in the life of the Eternal Logos.

The Evangelist John is a dramatist not an historian

What then has John given us? The Gospel is a drama in which the chief protagonists are Jesus, the Word of God, and the evil powers of darkness and unbelief. The Prologue serves as the Prelude (first 18 verses); the dramatic climax is reached at the Passion, the moment when Jesus' 'hour' has come. John selects the material primarily for its dramatic power, and many of the vivid details, which have often been claimed as marks of an eyewitness, may well be regarded as a part of John's creative purpose. The Gospel is overflowing with dramatic moments — the declaration of Messiahship to the Samaritan woman, the withdrawal of Judas into the outer darkness, the meeting of Mary Magdalene with the Risen Master — while 'dramatic irony' is apparent in Peter's boast that he will lay down his life for Christ, in Caiaphas' unconscious prophecy that Jesus should 'die for the nation, and not for the nation only,' in the Pharisees' complaint that 'the whole world is gone after him.'

Ipsissima verba and *ipsissima vox*

It is helpful to learn an important way of speaking about the Gospel texts. It is a way of understanding of how we can explain many variances we find in the texts of our gospels and maintain our insistence on them teaching God's revealed Truths. A living religion will always rest on something more than just its historical accuracy. Undoubtedly in reporting Jesus' teaching John reflects not the Jewish tradition, which sought to preserve, as nearly as possible in their original form… but rather the Greek method, which loved to put into the mouth of the speaker, not the ***ipsissima verba*** (very words) spoken on a given occasion, but the sentiments which seemed to the writer to be proper to that occasion, the **ipsissima vox** (the very voice) of Jesus. What we hear in the words of the texts are recollections, under divine inspiration, the reality of who Jesus was, along with his words and his deeds. There are variations between the texts but through it all, the voice of Jesus resonates powerfully and incessantly. That is what the work of the Holy Spirit guarantees and why we celebrate the Gospels as divine revelation bringing blessings to the world.