

## John

Most people like to think about what has gone on in the past. Many people trace their ancestors, and from the earliest times of humankind, stories have been told about tribes and families that help to define their identity, to say: this is who we are. This is the reason why the Church, too, remembers people from the past – those who have passed on their faith to us: saints, martyrs, missionaries. They tell us where we have come from, and there is often some hope in us that some time in the future people will remember us too and what we have done.

It is thought that the apostle John – the ‘beloved disciple’ set up a church, a community, and that he dictated his memories, his thoughts and his teachings to his own disciples, who wrote them down in the form which we now know as the Gospel of John. There are a number of different methods of organising a church or community in the New Testament: one important way is seen in Paul’s organisation of his missionary churches around bishops, letters of instruction and encouragement, and the accounts of Jesus which became part of the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Here we find tight organisation and logical theological teaching, most of all in Paul’s own letters. A second important way is seen in the work of John and his community: in John’s Gospel and in his letters, and also probably in the Book of Revelation, which belongs to the same tradition.

In John’s style of church, things depend not so much on outward discipline and ceremony but on love and service. These are the key parts of the teaching about Jesus in John’s gospel, and they are the reason why the gospel of John is so different from the other three. As we shall see, for example, there is no mention of ceremonies like baptism and the eucharist in John, but there is very clear and deep teaching on the meaning of the saving waters, and of the Bread of Life. Christians who rely on John’s gospel alone will perhaps appear vague and indeed almost mystical, but they may well have a greater grasp of the meaning of what it is to be a follower of Jesus.

John’s gospel is in many ways the disciple’s reflection on some of the vivid memories he has of his life with Jesus. Where he tells us stories, they are detailed and exciting, but they almost always give rise to a serious amount of teaching in depth. Jesus in John does a lot of talking – what we call the discourses – where he explains the meaning of the different miracles he performs, or goes into depth on who he is or how much the world is in need of him.

It is obvious from the start that John’s gospel is going to be different, from that beautiful prologue where he immediately goes into the cosmic and other-worldly. *In the beginning was the Word, and*

*the Word was with God, and the Word was God (1.1)* shows to us that this will be no normal history. And so it turns out.

We are also encouraged to know that in this Word came to being *life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it (1.4-5)*. Where faith does not seem to matter, or where we face opposition in our living and preaching the Christian faith, it important to know that life is really in Jesus, and also that the darkness did not overcome the light of his life. This isn't some clever playing with words – notice that John makes a statement that the darkness **did not overcome** the light. The whole thing about John's gospel is that Jesus represents life, light, and the Word of God, and that in the experience of John himself that light was not overcome even by the most valiant attempts of the darkness.

Think about your own life. You may face pain and suffering, but that will not overcome the light. You may even struggle to live, but the life that is Christ is not overcome. You may find it hard to see God's Word at work, but the noise and anger of unbelief cannot drown out the glory of this Word of God who *became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a Father's only son, full of grace and truth (1.14b)*. The beloved disciple gained a glimpse of this Word in Jesus, and he is ready to give his own life and work to that Jesus.

I mentioned earlier that in John we don't read of sacramental actions, but discover instead a rich painting of the signs that form the basis for the sacramental life of the Church: water; bread; wine; sight and healing. In John's Gospel, Jesus is in himself the sacrament of God. This means that the life of a Christian has to be very closely modelled on his life, and our behaviour has to depend on what *he* wants us to do and to be, not what *we* want to do and be. He has called us, with the special and varied gifts we all have, to be his life in today's world. That life in us is to be the light of all people, a light that darkness did not overcome.

When Jesus questions people in John's gospel, he speaks not to their external circumstances, but directly to their hearts. We have over the last weeks read in Mass the great account of the Samaritan woman at the well in Chapter 4, and the healing of the man blind from birth in Chapter 9. Jesus challenges sin, and also the hypocrisy of those who loudly condemn sin in others, but are full of it themselves. Jesus makes people ask the right questions of themselves.

Those who are called to be teachers of the faith are especially subject to the temptation to tell people what they are to believe, and thereby to make them dependent on the teachers themselves. By contrast, Jesus in John's gospel sets out to awaken faith in those he encounters. Jesus shows a

better way than just telling people what they ought to believe or do. Jesus says to the Samaritan woman: *The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him (4.23)*. He is telling her that the time has come when true worship will not depend on which mountain people worship on (as it did for the Jews and Samaritans) but simply worshipping in spirit and truth. Your life and mine, and the worship carried on by our churches, these have to be measured against that standard: do we worship in spirit and truth? No matter what the outward form is, does it help us to worship in spirit and in truth? The spirit will become obvious in the holiness and fervour of our prayer; the truth will be shown in the way that we live – and this is a problem for the whole Church, which needs to pay attention to acting truly in the name of the Lord Jesus. When we are seen to be argumentative, to fail to listen to others who speak from the heart, when we do not speak to that which is of God in other people, then we are not showing that truth, and our worship has been vain and empty.

Yes, in fact it is both glorious and hard to be a follower of Jesus. After teaching his disciples about the Bread that is his flesh for the life of the world, Jesus sees that *many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him (6.66)*. He turns to the twelve, and asks them: *‘Do you also wish to go away?’ Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God’ (6.67b-68)*.

Much of the training that is offered to clergy is all about how to do things, or about learning histories and ways of thinking – all of which are very important. Knowing Jesus doesn’t always get much room in the plans. What gets preached from the pulpit or taught in pastoral letters follows the same pattern. It is easily assumed that preachers do already know Jesus, yet it takes years to know Jesus with the wisdom and familiarity we should expect of our clergy. The hard reality is that knowing Jesus is a work we all do together, relying on each other as fellow-Christians because no one is an ‘expert’ in knowing Jesus.

As last week, I don’t want to spend a great deal of time describing Jesus in meticulous detail as he is presented in John’s gospel, for as you can see, the deep, questioning presence of Jesus in this gospel has led me to reflect in a deep and questioning way about what Jesus asks of us today. I want to finish this last Lent Address by looking at the experience of the risen Christ as described by John, for there is an intimacy here from which we can learn and in which we can grow.

When bible students look at the resurrection appearances of Jesus, they are often asking questions like: what did he look like? did the disciples recognise him? was he real, or an illusion? I think that

the most important thing was the fact that they felt close to him and intimate with him. In John, the risen Jesus appears in the garden where he was buried; in the upper room; on the lakeside. He enters into the deep emotion of a woman in mourning; into the fear of the disciples and the doubts of Thomas; into the well-earned breakfast after a strenuous fishing expedition. He is part of their lives, eating and drinking with them, and these parts of their lives become special because he is present. I like to call this the 'upper room experience'. There is a special and intimate place in your life and in mine where we can meet Jesus. It is a quiet and secluded place, and it is necessary for us to spend time with Jesus there so that we can become his witnesses.

In our heart and mind, there has to be a quiet place where we can simply be with Jesus, carry on a conversation with him, or simply know that he is there alongside us. In our homes, there has to be time and room for Jesus – in prayer and reflection: a quiet place, or a quiet time. In our communities, our churches have to be an 'upper room' for people where they can come to be with Jesus. Communities where churches are used only for formal services are impoverished. I know, because some of the communities I have served have been like that for generations, and they really cannot easily see the church as just being a quiet place to be with Jesus. But this is the 'upper room' too.

Here in the upper room we come to know Jesus, and in the one word so dear to John that I have not yet used, to love Jesus: to love Jesus in a way that goes beyond all our wonderful experience of earthly love, in a way that gives us the fresh joy and wonder of falling in love over and over again. This upper room is the place we can return in times of suffering and questioning, to find the one who suffers and questions with us. We can rediscover those waters of joy welling up to eternal life which inspired us to follow him in the first place, and we can be put in touch with the true life that pulsates through the cosmos, so as to be at home with God, with one another, with the world around us, and with ourselves.

Most of all, we can realise again in that Upper Room that, like John, we are beloved disciples, and we can each one of us know that our lives are to be like this book – John's gospel – written so that many *may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing (they) may have life in his name (20.31).*

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