

Sermon: FEAST OF ST. JOHN THE EVANGELIST, December 27th, 2015

In the Name...

Well, Merry Christmas. Yes, it is the Third Day of the Christmas Season – so, watch out for French Hens.

Today, though, is also a special day in the Church Calendar in that it is the Feast of St. John the Evangelist, the beloved disciple, the author of the Gospel which begins not with a traditional Nativity story, but, with a theological statement. “In the beginning was the Word.” It is altogether appropriate, then, that a disciple who really understood who Jesus was should be remembered and honoured in this Season of the Holy Birth.

But, who was John? Biographically, he was the son of Zebedee, a fisherman of Galilee, and Salome, the sister of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Zebedee was of some standing in the Jewish community and John may have been a student at the high priest's house in Jerusalem as he was well known there. We know John was deeply religious and concerned about the times in which he lived because, when we first meet him in the Gospels, he is a follower of John the Baptist, the zealous prophet of personal repentance and social change.

And, he also must have known something was different about his cousin, Jesus. John is often called “the beloved disciple”, perhaps because of his insight, and Jesus invited him to witness the raising of Jairus' daughter, the Transfiguration on the mountain, and to keep watch at Gethsemane. And, from the Cross, it was to John that Jesus commended the care and keeping of his grieving mother.

As an Apostle, John based himself in the city of Ephesus and worked to establish and strengthen what have become known as the Seven Churches of Asia - Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.

It is later recorded that during the reign of the Emperor Domitian (81-96) John, by then in his seventies, was arrested and brought to Rome. The details are vague, but, it seems that although Domitian wanted to execute him, John was, instead, sent into exile on the island of Patmos. This is significant. Then, as now, exile was a sentence reserved for politically sensitive prisoners, like Nelson Mandela or Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn; people you couldn't just kill without widespread repercussions. So, that tells us something about John that even a Roman Emperor with a reputation for cruelty had to treat him with some regard.

It was on Patmos that John wrote the Book of the Revelation and, after the death of Domitian, he was released by the new Emperor, Nerva, and returned to Ephesus, where he continued preaching.

John died at the age of 94, a great age in those days and which may have given rise to the rumours that we heard him refute in the Gospel this morning claiming Jesus had said he would live forever.

Well, so much for the man, but, it is his writings which have truly given him immortality. The earliest theologians of the Church called his Gospel "enspirited." That is, whereas Matthew, Mark, and Luke emphasize what Jesus did, John focuses on who Jesus was and what he meant through the Incarnation, the relationship to the Father, Redemption, spiritual rebirth and the Holy Eucharist.

And, John also wrote three letters which were incorporated into the New Testament. The main theme in these was that, in contrast to the values of the world, Christians must first and foremost exhibit love.

1 John 4:7-8: "Let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is of God and knows God... He who does not love does not know God, for God is love"

This emphasis on unconditional love has been called both Christianity's greatest strength and its Achilles Heel. On the one hand, it has caused Christians to do more good for the world than any other religious group in history, and at the same time has left it open to charges of being wishy-washy. Indeed, it is the Christian paradox to say that in order to be a conservative Christian, one must be a liberal.

Paradox it is, but, John is someone who had personal experience of this tension. You may remember that, in his youthful zeal, he had once asked Jesus to call down fire from heaven and blast a Samaritan town off the face of the earth, killing innocent men, women and children, simply because it had refused to let them stay the night.

It's a long way from advocating mass murder to becoming the man who could write: "The way we came to know love was that he laid down his life for us; so we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers"

John understood that so many of the world's ills, its wars, repression, injustices, were caused by fear - fear of losing position or possessions; fear of new people, new ideas, new ways of doing things; even fear of things which will never happen, like a tsunami hitting Swedesboro. And so he wrote, "he who fears has not been made perfect in love.If someone says I love God, but, hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?"

A persistent story has it that John's "parishioners" grew tired of his always talking about love in his sermons and complained. John is said to have answered: "But, this is the most important commandment. If you will fulfil this one, then you fulfil all."

Whether the story is true or not, it may be called the summary of the entire Bible. God is love. Love one another. So simple and so profound. Saint John truly stands as a living example of Our Lord's beatitude: "Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God."

So, may we follow the example of St. John, live with love and without fear, and see God.

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