

The Beloved disciple

27 12 09

Merciful Lord,
cast your bright beams of light upon the Church;
that, being enlightened by your teaching
of your blessed apostle and evangelist Saint John,
we may so walk in the light of your truth
through Jesus Christ your incarnate Son our Lord.

My text may be found in John chapter 21 and verse 7:

‘That disciple whom Jesus loved’

Today, 27th December, is appropriately enough the feast of St John the Evangelist who, according to my text this morning, was ‘That disciple whom Jesus loved’.

John is the brother of James, sons of Zebedee whom Jesus nicknamed ‘Boanerges’, sons of thunder, because they were so incensed and outraged by the rejection of Jesus by the inhabitants of a Samaritan village that they wanted Jesus to destroy it like Sodom and Gomorrah by calling down fire from heaven. With Peter and his brother, James, John was one of three disciples privileged to witness key moments in Jesus’ earthly ministry: his Transfiguration on Mount Tabor; the restoration to life of Jairus’ daughter; Jesus’ agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. Alone among the twelve, John stood at the foot of the cross with Mary, the mother of Jesus, into whose care the Blessed Virgin was entrusted.

In the fourth gospel, John is called the beloved disciple. At the Last Supper, John is seated next to Jesus and is depicted by artists as resting his head on Jesus to symbolise the love that Jesus had not only for John but for all his disciples, a love that mirrored the love between the three persons of the Trinity, between Father, Son and Holy Spirit; the love God feels for all his creation and which we, as Christians, should in turn reflect in all to all.

The fourth gospel, attributed to John, is very different from the other three. Matthew, Mark and Luke, the Synoptic Gospels, each provide a distinctive individual view of Jesus' life, death and resurrection but share parables and miracles, a common structure of time and place. Written after the other three, John's is a more reflective gospel, looking back at what Jesus did and taught and presenting an understanding of what Jesus intended. It is the fruit of years of inspired reflection on John's part. His is a gospel that draws out the underlying meanings from encounters with people such as the Nicodemus in chapter 3; the Samaritan woman in chapter 4; the lame man at the pool of Bethesda in chapter 5; the blind man in the Temple in chapter 9; Mary, Martha and Lazarus in chapter 11. John provides us uniquely with the seven great 'I am' statements: for example 'I am the Way the truth and the life'. Alone in his gospel, Bartholomew is called Nathaniel and John himself is never mentioned by name.

Instead, we have a phrase 'the beloved disciple', a title that is at the heart of his gospel, his understanding of what the Good News is all about. John 3 v16 is described as the Gospel in a nutshell and if you were only to memorise one verse from the Bible, this should be it: 'God so loved the world that he gave his only

begotten son, Jesus Christ that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life'. It summarises succinctly the love God has for us and the length God is prepared to go to express that love for us. For John, to claim to be the beloved disciple is not a boast or being big-headed but a simple statement of the truth which is true of each one of us for each one of us is beloved of God.

After the sermon, I am going to baptise baby Carina Gordon. For her family, particularly for Alexandre and Marina, her parents, little Carina will always be just that, beloved, much loved, however much she grows. To Alexandre and Marina, Carina will always be a person to love because she is the fruit of their love for each other. How true, too, is this of how God sees each one of us.

According to Clement of Alexandria, John never ceased to repeat the simple message that God loved us however tedious, however tired his own disciples grew of its repetition. John's only justification was he was repeating an essential truth: that God loves us. In baptism, we are responding to the love of God so that, like the beloved disciple, we too can lay our head trustingly on Jesus' breast.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist
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H: Sermon 21: Beloved disciple

