

The Beloved Disciple

27 12 15

Merciful Lord,
cast your bright beams of light upon the Church,
that being enlightened by the teaching
of your blessed apostle and evangelist Saint John,
we may so walk in the light of your truth
that we may at last attain to the light of everlasting life,

Our text may be found in today's gospel from John chapter 21 and verse 20:

'the disciple whom Jesus loved . . .'

Well done ! Not only have you survived Christmas but you have made the effort to come to church today to celebrate the feast day of St John, apostle and evangelist; writer of the fourth gospel, three epistles and the Book of Revelation.

I'd like to ask two questions this morning: one about who the beloved disciple is and one about what we owe him.

So who is the beloved disciple ? Well, the answer should be easy: John, son of Zebedee, the younger brother of James, a fisherman from Capernaum on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, one of the two disciples of John the Baptist who pointed them to Jesus as the Lamb of God. Scholars have offered us the possibility that Lazarus could be he whom Jesus loved. Certainly, chapter 11 of

the fourth gospel tells us that Jesus loved Lazarus. But though Jesus loved Lazarus, what makes Lazarus unlikely to be the beloved disciple is simply the fact he was not one of the twelve so would necessarily have lacked the first-hand experience that clearly the writer of the fourth gospel has.

And what do we owe John? As I said just now, his writing: a gospel; three epistles and Revelation.

John's gospel is different from the other three. Matthew, Mark and Luke are the synoptic gospels and though they each have their individual characteristics, they are clearly singing from the same hymn sheet. Not so John. His take on Jesus is different, more spiritual. He omits some great stuff that the other three have but gives us stuff that's unique to him. To be brief, let me point to the seven great 'I am' statements about Jesus – your homework is to see how many you can write down for yourself – but let me limit myself just to 'I am the light of the world' (8 v12) a statement encapsulated in our stained glass window of the celebrated painting by Holman Hunt. Then, there is his distinctive beginning with the Word becoming flesh – pure poetry and his different end – the post resurrection encounter on the shore of the sea of Galilee, breakfast with Jesus and Peter forgiven. Only John has the Jesus' first miracle water into wine at the wedding at Cana in Galilee. Only John has an account of the death and raising to life of Lazarus and of Mary, his sister, anointing Jesus with costly perfume. Only John has the encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well or with the woman caught in the act of adultery. Only John calls our patron saint, Bartholomew, Nathaniel and only John relates how Philip introduced his friend to Jesus and that

Nathaniel was one of the seven disciples in the boat when the newly resurrected Jesus gives them breakfast on the shore.

John's three Epistles, seven chapters, 133 verses, six pages in my NRSV, are a first hand account of someone who has seen, heard and touched Jesus Christ, the Son of God in the flesh. They focus on the love of God, the light of Christ, the forgiveness of sin. They encourage us, as Christians, to have a loving relationship with God through our love of others.

The Book of Revelation is not an easy read as it predicts, depicts, the Second Coming. Rooted in Jewish eschatological writing, it is not easy to get our heads round the imagery and the ideas may seem as foreign and strange to us as the original Greek in which it is written. But I love the image of Jesus standing outside the door and knocking (Rev 3 v20). He wants to come into our lives and be a real presence alongside us but we do first have to open the door to let him in. And I am greatly encouraged by the vision of the new Jerusalem (Rev 21 v4) where there will be no weeping nor mourning no tears any more for death will be no more and we will never again be separated from those we love.

So we can see that John, the beloved disciple, is someone whom we as Christians owe so much. But let me leave you to ponder on this question: Does the example of a beloved disciple encourage you with the thought, the possibility, that each one of us, as Christians, can be beloved disciples. What do you think ?

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

Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

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G: Sermons 33 : Beloved disciple

