

St John

St James, Colwall, 27th December 2009

Today is the festival of St John, brother of our St James and Apostle and Evangelist. Quite why the church decided to celebrate such an important festival in the aftermath of Christmas, I don't really know – it is not as if we are short of days in Trinity which could be sparked up with a festival, but there you are. There's another problem for the preacher too. The celebration is of John, Apostle and Evangelist, and modern scholarship would tend to make these two separate people. Tradition has it that John wrote the gospel in his old age at Ephesus, very early in the second century – he would have been in his 90s. Unfortunately the earliest evidence we have for the gospel is in mid second century, with no one referring to John at Ephesus before then. Well, I won't go into the details of this fascinating story and I resolve it in my own mind by thinking that this gospel was written and published by someone called John, but based on apostolic testimony, possibly the apostle John.

The most striking thing about this gospel is that it is totally different in style from the other gospels, called the synoptic gospels because they are written from the same point of view. They are much more like history – they recount events in the life of Christ in a chronological order. It is not that the events in Christ's life are missing from John, but he is not writing to give us a history of events and there are substantial differences from the synoptics. In John, Jesus goes three times to Jerusalem, in the synoptics, only once. In John, the crucifixion takes place before the Passover, not afterwards as in the synoptics. Surely John, who witnessed the crucifixion and was at the foot of the cross when Christ died would not make a mistake about that – or are we going to say that the gospel of Mark, written within living memory of the crucifixion, was wrong? There are differences in style too. In the synoptics, Jesus speaks in parables or in short pithy sayings. In John, there are theological discourses and no parables.

The reason for these differences is that John is writing with a different purpose in mind from the other evangelists. You can regard it as the mature reflection of someone looking back on the life of Christ after the best part of a century. Of course, all the gospels were written and inspired by the life of Christ. I get the impression with Mark for example that it was very much an immediate impression as if he was thinking, this was extraordinary, I must write it down before I forget. Matthew was equally inspired, but wanting to relate the life of Christ to Jewish beliefs and seeing it as the fulfilment of the Old Testament. Luke, on the other hand is wanting to do a proper history but including, in Acts, some events in the history of the early church. They were all overwhelmed by Jesus, but all very much concerned with facts.

John, on the other hand is concerned with meaning and interpretation and significance. This is why he sets the crucifixion before the Passover, when the Passover lambs were sacrificed in the temple. Everything in John is there for a purpose and that purpose was to convey something of the deep significance of Jesus and as a result take the gospel into your own heart. As he says, towards the end of the gospel, "these things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that in that faith you may have life through His name."

So John's thinking on Jesus is very much concerned with the divinity of Christ and lies right at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. Take the prologue, for example, which is the gospel reading for Christmas day: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." That is a deliberate reference to the opening of Genesis and the foundation of Creation. It asserts the eternity of Christ and is the foundation of our doctrine of the Trinity. Can you

imagine the impact this statement would have had on first century Jews? When Jesus made such claims about Himself it was enough to get Him crucified, but John is actually spelling it out in more detail. Jesus is not just the long awaited Messiah, who would deliver the Jews from the Roman occupation, but was divine, on a par with God Himself. This is God, intervening in history.

Now I think we don't take on board the full impact of the eternal nature of Christ today. When we are thinking about the meaning of the life of Christ, it is not that something happened on the day of the crucifixion that enabled us to come closer to God. If we are saved because of that day, so was Abraham and so was prehistoric man and so was the whole of creation. Nothing changed on the day of crucifixion except that by that act we became aware of that and could act accordingly. It is an event calling for a response. And that is what the gospel of John is about, namely responding to Jesus: "All who received Him, who believed in His Name, He gave power to become children of God". We are not talking about assenting to certain propositions here, but actually taking the active principle of Christ into our lives.

That is the significance of that word, "Word". It carries all sorts of meanings, particularly in the Greek speaking world that John lived in. One is straightforward – a word is an embodiment of a thought just as the Word became flesh. But it is also related to wisdom, which in Jewish thought was an active principle, not just something that old people – sometimes – acquire late in life. The active principle works within us. The Word transforms the world, but only by transforming our lives.

Another characteristic of John's gospel is the frequency of the great, "I am" statements. Like, "In the beginning" this would have had, and was meant to have, a resonance with "I am the God of Abraham" and all the other "I am" sayings in the Old Testament. But in Jesus' case there is this strong element of interaction and assimilation: "I am the bread of life...", "I am the water of life..." and above all, "I am the way, the truth and the life..." You must eat that bread, you must drink that water and you must follow that way if you are to respond to Jesus. John's gospel is nothing if not challenging.

The gospel also has a very characteristic vocabulary. He loves the words, truth, love, life but there is one word which I think needs a bit of explanation and that is 'the Jews'. It is 'the Jews' who plot against Jesus and 'the Jews' who ultimately crucify Him. This has been used to justify anti-Semitism and to say that John actually encourages it. Well, Jesus was a Jew and so was John so I think that can't really be justified. I think that what John meant by this phrase was the establishment, the powers that be. Whenever I read this phrase, I mentally replace it by 'the church' and I think that that conveys the right sort of feeling.

Whatever the words, there is no doubt that the gospel of John is difficult and quite rightly so, because it is dealing with the relationship between you, the reader, and God. You are not going to sort that out in a few well chosen phrases. It is something you have to sort out in your life, but in that process, the gospel of John is immensely helpful and stimulating – it is worth the time it takes to read it and reflect on it. So let's end with one of our favourite verses:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him should not be lost, but should have eternal life."

Let us thank God that that is so.