

*the gift of john*  
a sermon preached on the  
*153<sup>rd</sup> Patronal Feast*  
1 May 2016  
at  
*st john's*  
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL  
by *fr david moore*, vicar

the lections: Proverbs 8:22-31, Psalm 97, 1 John 1:1-5, John 20:1-8

The character of a parish can be profoundly influenced by its patron saint in all kinds of ways. What is distinctive about John's gospel? And what might be John's influence?

Reflecting on these questions, I propose to do two things today. Firstly, I'll offer some reflections about John the Evangelist, and his gospel. Then I'll suggest some ways in which this might be relevant for us, as this parish, at this time.

We do not know with certainty who 'John the Evangelist' was.<sup>1</sup> We cannot even be sure that a person by the name of John wrote the gospel bearing his name; nor even if there was *one* person who wrote it. Indeed, scholars favour multiple authorship; concluding that someone finished it off to the final form we have received. But we can know a great deal about the community for whom John wrote his gospel: their religious background and their spiritual concerns.

Anyone who really listens to John is immediately struck by John's uniqueness, when compared with the other three gospels, the 'synoptics'. In John there is no account of a virginal conception, nor any conception – Jesus is simply called 'the son of Joseph'. Jesus is not baptised by John the Baptist – all John does is 'bear witness' to Jesus. There is no account of temptations, nor transfiguration. The story of the cleansing of the Temple is not associated with the final week of Jesus' life – instead it features at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. John introduces characters either unknown or hardly mentioned elsewhere. There are no short provocative sayings, no parables, and no Sermon on the Mount – instead Jesus speaks in long and complex dialogues, with evocative and dense imagery.

Crucially, John shows no interest in 'atonement for sin' – a concern of St Paul, and a neurotic fixation in Christianity. John, rather, is greatly interested in 'life in all its fullness', 'abiding in God's love', and, most importantly, John envisages a radical one-ness with God. Why?

When we consider John's mode – its language, images, and preoccupations – it is unmistakably within what is broadly known as the mystical tradition, specifically, Jewish mysticism. Mysticism appears in every religious tradition: and is often a commentary on the adequacy – or otherwise – of traditional definitions. Written some decades after the synoptic gospels, John appears to have taken what they understood, and then enlarged and profoundly deepened the good news. If we did not have John's gospel, Christianity would be very different indeed.

It seems that the Johannine community has undergone the excruciating process of separation from the Jewish synagogue. It would appear that they have felt called to take a stand – for an understanding of the meaning of Jesus and the intent of their Jewish religious inheritance – which meant they could no longer remain within the synagogue.

And then it appears that the community has split again, this time internally: between those who, losing their nerve, have attempted to regress, to go backwards to the imagined safety of the synagogue, and those who have become convinced in the future direction of faith in the Christ perceived as Word made flesh. At the end of the long chapter 6 'Bread of Life' discourse the pain within the community is graphic: "When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult, who can accept it?' ... Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him."<sup>2</sup>

What is it that's so difficult in the teaching of John's Jesus? Without doubt, John's unique 'signs' and symbols are an offence or a stumbling block to the literal-legal minded. "I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again"<sup>3</sup> "Unless I wash you, you have no share in

<sup>1</sup> see Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John (i-xii)*, New York: Doubleday, 1966, ppLXXXVI ff

<sup>2</sup> John 6:60,66

<sup>3</sup> John 3:3

me”.<sup>4</sup> To be grafted into ‘the vine’<sup>5</sup>, to abide with the Father<sup>6</sup>, to “eat the flesh of the Human one”,<sup>7</sup> is the unmistakable challenge of enfleshed mysticism, language to describe the new human consciousness first witnessed in Jesus.

But perhaps the greatest scandal is that, according to John, *all humankind is called* into this new consciousness: “I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one”.<sup>8</sup> “I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do, and in fact will do greater works than these”.<sup>9</sup> Greater works! “Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh”.<sup>10</sup> “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them”.<sup>11</sup>

Here is the enormity of John’s proclamation: “This gospel is about the divine appearing in the human and calling the human to a new understanding of what divinity means. It is about bringing God out of the sky and redefining God as the ultimate dimension of the human. It is about the gift of the spirit transcending the limits of the flesh, not in some pious or religious sense, but in opening the flesh to all that it means to be human. It is about seeing Jesus as the doorway into a new consciousness, which is also a doorway into God, who might be perceived as a universal consciousness.”<sup>12</sup> What a vision! And so, many turned away.

Turning, then, to us, to this particular community of the baptised, at ‘the junction’, at this time – on this our patronal feast day, as we make tangible our renewed commitment to our mission and ministry here – in what ways might John’s insights assist and guide us in our discipleship?

Firstly, we can note the central Johannine calling into one-ness with God: “so that you also may have communion with the Father and with his Son Jesus the Christ... so that your joy may be made full”.<sup>13</sup> “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly”.<sup>14</sup> This tells us that the ‘core business’ of the faith community is union with God: from this sacred centre all else freely flows.

Secondly, we note that this radical union with God involves both a new human consciousness, and a new and redefined understanding of the meaning of Divinity. God, for John, is no longer in the skies – up there, out there, back there – but embedded in wounded human flesh, ‘God as the ultimate dimension of the human’. “I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one” – a new and universal human consciousness!

Now we can see that these are the spiritual insights of a mature faith community: the kind of community that has grown past the spiritual immaturity of that first flush of unconscious enthusiasm, defined and measured by superficial ‘success’. If we could grasp this, we would no longer fret over our greying hairs, which we would no longer consider as impediment. We would be liberated from the dark spell of all those now-widespread condemning voices.

Instead, we could realise our spiritual maturity as tremendous gift. Look around – you are the gold! Right here, in this building, you are those who have suffered and endured life. And your suffering and wisdom is the very ground in which the Johannine insight can take root and flourish. For only those who have truly suffered are able to grasp the crucial spiritual teaching of Jesus in John’s gospel: “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain: but if it dies, it bears much fruit”.<sup>15</sup> The Spirit transcending the limits of the flesh. Mary Magdalene grasps this, and this is precisely her gift as the first apostle of the church,<sup>16</sup> in the evolution of human consciousness.

How desperately the world is in need of this spiritual wisdom in our time! If we could accept it, what an astonishing gift we might have to give!

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4 John 13:8

5 John 15:4-5

6 John 14:17

7 John 6:53

8 John 17:23

9 John 14:12

10 John 6:51

11 John 6:56

12 John Shelby Spong, *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic*, New York: HarperOne, 2013, p68.

13 1 John 1:3-4

14 John 10:10

15 John 12:24

16 John 20:18