

on eagle's wings
a sermon preached on the
feast of st john the evangelist
patronal festival
4 May 2014
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
by the revd canon dr colleen o'reilly

Proverbs 8.22-31 Psalm 97 1 John 1.1-5 John 20.2-8

Thank you for your invitation to be with you today for your patronal festival. It is now twenty years ago that you welcomed us when we moved from Sydney to Melbourne and spent a year in this parish. I bring you the greetings of the people of St George's Malvern. May I take them yours?

If you Google the word 'eagle' it is not information about the bird that first pops up. You will be given sites about sporting teams, rock bands and films – but not birds. And you will certainly not be given anything about St John the Evangelist and the eagle which symbolizes John's gospel.

Eagles are often found in Anglican churches. It's a bit of an 'Anglican peculiar', a favourite custom of ours to have a lectern, the bible book stand in the sanctuary of churches, in the form of an eagle. Usually made in brass, but sometimes carved in wood, these eagles spread their wings in practical support of the book, but also to symbolize the gospel being carried over all the world.

It's not surprising that the eagle came to be the symbol for John the evangelist, the gospel writer. One of the most beautiful depictions of the evangelist and the eagle is in the Book of Kells. Perhaps you know it. The first page of John's gospel in that magnificent artifact is an extraordinary synthesis of Byzantine imagery and Celtic interlaced calligraphy. And we call the period of its production 'the dark ages'!

John's gospel soars. Someone once said the fourth gospel, John's, is like a pool where an infant may wade and an elephant may swim. It is clearly different from the other three, Matthew, Mark and Luke. Those three are so similar, though they also differ, that we call them the synoptic gospels. They give us one large overview of Jesus, much like the synoptic weather chart gives us a large snap shot of all the weather patterns.

But John takes us to different places. Not for John stories about Jesus' physical birth. John takes us way above and beyond Israel's history; way above and beyond village gossip about an unexpected pregnancy; way and above tales of foreigner visitors with

lavish gifts. John takes us to the very beginnings of creation. Our sights are lifted to the very origins of all that is, seen and unseen.

Don't you think it is an intriguing question to ask: *why* is there anything and not simply nothing at all? It's a question worth asking the children you know.

It's the question many these days think is answered solely by science. Yes, there seems have been a big bang, cosmic event, in the beginning, but where did that cosmic matter come from and why? It's a question John would applaud us for asking, for John has not so much an explanation as a vision and a story to draw us into the mystery of existence.

John makes his purpose explicit; he writes that we might believe. He has seen and believed, and now writes that we too might come to faith. And what is that faith? It is placing our trust in the God who loves us, not because we are good, though we may be; not because we must strive to prove ourselves worthy, but because God IS love, and nothing else or less than the source of all love. Love is what God does. God is not a noun, but a verb.

In the beginning, says John, the Word was. And the Word was with God, and the Word was God. Like Holy Wisdom, the Word already was before God made anything that was made. Nothing was made without the Word, for in the Word was life. The Word is oriented towards God right from the beginning, *and* towards God's creation, right from the beginning. Oriented towards both realms; at home in both realms. Like the eagle that both soars to the heavens and plunges to the earth, the Word moves between these two expressions of God's creation, the world we see now and the world we only glimpse for now, and entering both, leads us to be at home in both.

And this two way Word, this two way expression of God's irrepressible life and love, becomes, John tells us so powerfully, flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone. This Word becomes 'the Son' in the symbolic language John draws upon as his gospel story unfolds. And we poor humans, so lacking in grace, so overcome by the darkness of a dis-oriented world, fail to see who it is who has pitched his tent among us.

John writes his magnificently crafted story of the signs of God at work in Jesus, so that we might see, not just these seven great signs of the gospel and believe, but that we ourselves might become signs.

One of John's great concerns is that the Church should know the true identity of Jesus. Such knowledge is never only a matter of understanding with the mind, but of a deep abiding of the heart. This is faith: to so live and move and have our being within the words and works of Jesus that we 'have' God. It is not a 'having' that possesses God, as if Christians alone had a monopoly on the One who calls all things in being. There are those who mistakenly imagine they do! It is rather, a having by which we

are possessed by the truth make known in Jesus, who is one of us and yet also risen Christ.

John is clear in the letters he writes to the infant Church that this same Jesus whom he had seen, whom he had heard, whom he had touched, is the very means by which God has chosen to be known most fully to us in this life of the flesh we share with Jesus. And this reaching out by God is so that we might also know eternal life which the Word made flesh has always lived and now shares with us in the gifting of the Spirit, the very breath, the very life of God.

Well this grand vision of John's is all very well, but what sense might it make for a parish at the busy Camberwell Junction in what is already the second decade of the twenty first century. Surely there are more practical things to be doing than letting our hearts and minds wonder about old John and his ancient writings? Not so, John would want to caution us. The spirituality he lived is no less *necessary* for faithful discipleship now, than back then.

It is a spirituality that arises from God's self communication, not only in creating the world but in redeeming the world from its captivity to the darkness of failing to receive that expression of God so freely offered to us in its fullest and most material form, the Word made flesh. That spirituality leads to our worship, our giving of worth to the only worthy One, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and thereby takes us to God.

And embraced by God, God's very breath is breathed into us that in even in absence we will sense God's presence, and be led into all truth and into all hope as we take our place in the community of believers.

No wonder the eagle still symbolizes the life of faith John lived, and urges us to do the same. The eagle, like the Spirit, moves between the earth and the heavens. We too are to live with our eyes upon the world, wide open to the complexities and unjust realities around the globe, and on our doorstep. Yet, through our worship we are to live with our eyes fixed upon another reality, gazing upon the God who is nothing other than love and light, and in whose returning gaze we are to abide.

Unless we embrace both realities, this two way orientation, this eagle like behaviour, we will fall into despair for this dark world, or retreat into the error of a disembodied spirituality that fails to take seriously the very truth John so stresses, that God comes to us as one of us to make a home for us where God is and then sends us to out in this world to await God's future, transforming the present in anticipation of the time when all suffering shall cease, all tears be wiped away and all lives, not just those of believers now, be hallowed before God in truth and love.

There are many other sermons I could have written about your patronal saint, but we would not get away today, much less to our lunch if I did. So like your saint I shall end here but for no other purpose that you may believe; that we may believe.

vicar@stgeorgesmalvern.org