

## ST JOHN, THE APOSTLE AND EVANGELIST

Exodus 33. 7-11

1 John 1. 1-10

John 21. 19b-25

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today we celebrate the Feast of St John the Evangelist, frequently referred to as ‘the Beloved Disciple’ in the Gospels. He was one of the first disciples called by Christ and is considered to be the author of the Gospel of St John, at least the first of the Epistles of St John and the Book of Revelation.

John was the son of Zebedee and Salomé and made his living fishing in the Lake of Galilee with his brother James, called James ‘the greater’. He and other disciples, including Peter and Andrew, had originally been followers of John the Baptist; but they immediately followed Christ when they were called (John 1. 35-42).

St John receives prominent placement throughout the Gospels as one of the three apostles to be present at the Transfiguration; one of the apostles sent to prepare a place for the Last Supper; one of the three apostles present in the Garden of Gethsemane when Christ was arrested; the apostle to whom Jesus entrusted His mother from the Cross; and the first to arrive at Christ's tomb following the Resurrection. He was also the apostle who first recognised Christ standing on the shore of the Lake of Galilee following the Resurrection.

After the Ascension of our Lord, St John travelled to Samaria and was thrown in prison with St Peter (Acts 4. 3). He also travelled to Ephesus and is credited with founding the church there. Ephesus is considered to be the location of his death, which occurred when he was about 100 years old.

Tradition holds that Emperor Domitian had St John beaten, poisoned and thrown in a pot of boiling oil, but that he emerged unscathed. The emperor then banished him to the island of Patmos, where he wrote the Book of Revelation.

The lesson from the Gospel appointed for the Feast of St John recounts a curious exchange between Jesus and St Peter about the fate of the ‘disciple whom Jesus loved’. In fact, this scene is the final of four scenes in which Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved appear together. The relationship of these two disciples seems to be an important subtext of this Gospel.

In the verses that immediately precede our Gospel reading, our Lord has exhorted St Peter to follow him and to ‘feed my lambs’, that is, to be the shepherd of his flock; to love them as he has loved them. And then Jesus goes on to give a prediction of St Peter’s martyrdom: ‘Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go’ (21. 18). We see that our Lord’s command to St Peter is not only an invitation to general discipleship; it is also a more specific invitation to martyrdom and death.

Having heard Jesus’ prediction, and seeing that St John is also present on the scene, St Peter asks, ‘Lord, what about him?’ To which Jesus replies, ‘If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!’ In actual fact, it turns out that St John did *not* remain alive until the Lord’s second coming; but his written testimony, given in his Gospel and other biblical writings, ensured that he remained ‘present’ in the Christian community even after his death.

But even if this is so, we are faced with a curious situation. St Peter and St John, two prominent disciples, are told by our Lord that they are going to have two separate

fates. For St Peter, discipleship will be characterised by a laying down of his life; and for St John, discipleship will be characterised by not becoming a martyr for his Lord. The future of each disciple – for Peter, to follow Jesus to death; for John, to remain – is decided by our Lord. St John will live out his love for Jesus in bearing witness to him. St John’s ministry is to be marked not by his death, but by his Gospel.

St Peter and St John provide very different models of love and discipleship to the Christian Church. If St Peter is the model – that is, if a life that is willing to embrace martyrdom fulfils our Lord’s commandments to his followers – then what about those believers who do *not* lay down their lives in love, who are not martyrs for the faith? Jesus’ remarks to St Peter suggest that such questions and comments are beside the point. St Peter is to be about the business of his discipleship, and St John is to be left to be about his.

It is certainly true that our Lord repeatedly calls his disciples to a life of love and self-giving; yet not all discipleship will be marked by the disciples’ laying down of their lives. Those of us who struggle daily to live out the love of Jesus in small ways compared to those who lay down their lives, may then be encouraged. Those for whom discipleship takes different forms may be assured that such discipleship is recognised and valued by our Lord.

There is, however, something else that St John’s example of discipleship suggests to us. The ‘disciple whom Jesus loved’ had a personal friendship with our Saviour. He did not simply follow Jesus and listen to him outwardly. He attempted to live with him, and live like him. This is only possible in the context of deep familiarity, imbued with the warmth of total trust. Such familiarity and trust happen when people are true friends.

You and I are called to this same friendship of warmth and love that defined the relationship between our Lord and St John. It is not enough for us to follow Jesus because we feel obligated to do so; if we do that, it is as if we were still under the obligations of the Old Testament Law, without the aid of supernatural grace. No, we are called to much more, to indeed develop a relationship of love and friendship with our Lord.

How is it possible to develop such a relationship? Well, we start simply, by coming to our Lord frequently in prayer. Our prayers do not have to be very long; they can even be telegraphic at times! But our Lord hears and answers every one of them. As we look to develop our relationship with God, perhaps some of us will feel inspired to set aside a short time each day – five minutes, for example – for prayer; for sharing and communicating with our God. Whatever our investment, it will be time well spent.

As we seek to develop our relationship with God, we can also come (as we have this morning) to hear his Word as given in the Scriptures; and to receive the holy Sacrament of the Eucharist. If we do these things regularly, we will soon see that they make a difference; because it is true that our *God meets with us* in his Word; and *he offers himself to us* in his Sacrament. His Word and Sacraments are food for our very souls; and they are building blocks for a solid relationship with him.

As we have recently seen, during the Christmas season, we emphasise the fact that God became man. God wanted to make himself more accessible to us, and to make it easier for us to develop that friendship with him. At Christmas, we celebrate the fact that the Lord has come to us, and that he continues to come to us.

He has taken the initiative and has shown us just how much he loves us; and we, like St John, are called to respond to this divine initiative and to develop a deep friendship

with him. As St Peter and St John have shown us, following Jesus is clearly not a matter of being special or worthy. It is simply a matter of loving Jesus enough to respond to his call and to trust in his love for us, no matter who we are and no matter what we have done.

Amen.