

SAINT JOHN: APOSTLE – EVANGELIST - THEOLOGIAN

[Some word of explanation is required regarding the following sermon. (1) The preceding week was filled with travel and meetings, allowing no time for sermon preparation—thus the necessity of “reaching into the barrel.” (2) The preceding Sunday we had finished our journey through the Mass down through “The Blessing,” and the following Sunday we were to proceed with “The Last Gospel,” i.e. the Prologue to the Gospel of John. Therefore an old sermon dealing with the person and work of Saint John seemed appropriate. (3) This particular sermon, however, happened to be a candidating sermon preached at Saint John’s seventeen years before. Bringing it up to date would have required a rather complete re-writing, not only because the sermon reflected the occasion of its writing but also because a sermon written for a congregation one does not really know is different in nature and tone from one written for a congregation one knows well and loves. Thus it was preached as it was but prefaced with similar words of explanation. (For those who may not know, Saint John’s at the time was nominally a “Christian Church: Disciples of Christ,” but essentially an ecumenical church, and I was a Presbyterian minister.)]

It is indeed a great pleasure to be with you again today and, beyond that, a marked privilege to be considered as pastor of Saint John’s. It was clear to me from my earliest contact that you were a unique congregation in the best sense of that word, unique in your history, unique in your founding leadership, unique in your calling, and, I sincerely believe, unique in your future. [And that I still believe!]

I don’t know what kind of holy inspiration lies behind your name, where the name came from or what was intended in the naming. But names when they really name say a great deal about who we are and why we are, and what we hope to be. That being the case, the name of Saint John is a most happy choice.

I know that many of you have spent a great deal of time over the years studying and reflecting on Saint John and his work, and those who have must know how foolish it would be to try to capture the life and thought of Saint John in one sermon—or in ten or a hundred, for that matter. Saint Augustine at the beginning of his *“Lectures on the Gospel According to Saint John”* spoke of John as one of those “mountains” in comparison with which the rest of us are but “hills.” “The mountains are lofty souls,” he wrote, “the hills little souls.” And he urged us little souls to “lift up our eyes to the mountains from whence cometh our help,” keeping in mind, of course, that help comes ultimately from the Lord who made heaven and earth—and the mountains and the hills.

We cannot begin to explore the nooks and crannies of this mountain this morning or assess its lofty height. Years of exploration will find us still on its lower slopes. But for all of that, it may be well at this transitional point in the life of a congregation that

bears his name to step back from the mountain and with our little Kodak Brownie to take a mere snapshot, a miniature, a two-dimensional photo of the great mountain—a most inadequate representation, to be sure, but a representation nonetheless, a reminder of the heights to which we are called, a brief glance upward to inspire and move us on. So let us consider this morning Saint John: the Apostle – Evangelist - Theologian.

I.

Apostle, first. You know of his call to be an apostle together with his brother James and Peter from their fishing nets on Lake Genneserat, but other early references to John are not altogether flattering. In the beginning his was a narrow zeal, caring more for righteousness than for love, filled more with pride than humility. He was ready to oppose any not of his own circle (Luke 9:54), ready to call down fire from heaven against the outsiders (Luke 9:49), and with James his brother asking to sit in the favored positions on Jesus' right hand and his left (Mark 10:35 ff.). Its not surprising that at the beginning Jesus called these two sons of Zebedee, 'Boanerges,' 'Sons of Thunder' (Mark 3:17), filled with zeal, bursting with energy, but needing to be tamed and trained.

But life in Jesus' presence had a transforming effect. John learned how deeply he was loved, and he learned to love in return. He does indeed sit at Jesus' right hand at the Last Supper, and there he leans against the Master's breast and is called 'the disciple whom Jesus loved.' At the cross, in love he takes Jesus' mother as his own. "There is your mother," Jesus said to him, and from that moment it is recorded, "the disciple took her into his home" (John 19:26-27). Early on Easter morning, in the eagerness of love, he outruns Peter to the tomb (John 20:2 ff.). John the Apostle, loved and loving.

The love of Christ for John revealed itself in suffering and John found the way of suffering as well. Following Jesus' resurrection and ascension John worked with Peter and the church in Judea, and soon thereafter the fires of persecution began. Early on his brother, James, was beheaded by Herod, who then proceeded to arrest Peter as well, but Peter escaped. The details of the story are recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, as you know. Some years later John moved to Ephesus to the church founded there by St. Paul, where he served the remainder of his lengthy days. In the year A.D. 95 there broke out persecution under the Emperor Domitian, whom the great historian Mosheim called "an

emperor little inferior to Nero in baseness of character and conduct,” and John was exiled to the Isle of Patmos, where he had the visions recorded in the Book of the Revelation. Tertullian and others asserted that he was first cast into a cauldron of boiling oil by order of the emperor and came out alive and unhurt. Pious legend perhaps, but consider Peter’s miraculous release from prison, or Paul and Silas at Philippi, and the miraculous deliverance promised the saints in the last verses (an addendum really) of the Gospel of Mark. After his release John returned to Ephesus, dying there a natural death (the only apostle to do so) in the days of Trajan about A.D. 100 “as a true witness,” Irenaeus put it, “of the tradition of the Apostles.”

Two stories are told of the latter days of the life of the beloved John. One, set forth by Eusebius, tells of a certain young man of ardent spirit whom the aged apostle John, after returning from exile, entrusted to the keeping of a certain bishop. The bishop brought him up, looked after him, finally gave him the grace of baptism, but thereafter relaxed his constant care and watchfulness. Little by little the young man was led astray by his peers into idleness and dissolution. A life of crime ensued and open renunciation of God’s salvation. He formed a band of bandits and was their mastermind, surpassing them all in violence, cruelty and blood thirstiness, so Eusebius relates.

Time went by and John returned for a visit and said, “Come now, bishop, pay me back the deposit which Christ and I left in your keeping, in the presence of the church over which you preside as my witness.” “He is dead,” the bishop answered, “dead to God. He turned out wicked and profligate, a bandit with an armed gang of men like himself.”

The apostle rent his garment, groaned aloud, and beat his head. “A fine guardian,” he cried, “I left of our brother’s soul! However, let me have a horse immediately and someone to show me the way.” He galloped off from the church, then and there, just as he was. When he arrived at the place and was seized by the bandit’s sentry-group, he made no attempt to escape and asked no mercy, but shouted: “This is what I have come for: take me to your leader.” For the time being the man waited, armed as he was; but as John approached he recognized him, and filled with shame, turned to flee. But John ran after him as hard as he could, forgetting his years and calling out: “Why do you run away

from me, child—from your own father, unarmed and very old? Be sorry for me, child, not afraid of me. You still have hopes of life. I will account to Christ for you. If need be, I will gladly suffer your death, as the Lord suffered death for us; to save you I will give my own life. Stop! Believe! Christ sent me!”

When he heard this, the young man stopped and stood with his eyes on the ground. He threw down his weapons; then he trembled and began to weep bitterly. When the old man came up he flung his arms around him, who was pleading for himself with groans as best he could, and was baptized a second time with his tears, but kept his murderous right hand out of sight. But John solemnly pledged his word that he had found pardon for him from the Saviour: he prayed, knelt down, and kissed that very hand as being cleansed by his repentance. Then he brought him back to the Church, interceded for him with many prayers, shared with him the ordeal of continuous fasting, brought his mind under control by all the enchanting power of words, and did not leave him, we are told, until he had restored him to the Church, giving a perfect example of true repentance and a perfect proof of regeneration, the trophy of a visible resurrection.

That story, Eusebius insists, “is not just a tale but a true account of John the Apostle, handed down and carefully remembered.”

The second story is related by Jerome and tells how John in those last years wished never again to be separated from the congregation at Ephesus, and how, though frail and failing, he always wanted to speak a daily message to the church. When he could no longer even be carried to the church, he sent his carefully prepared message by others, caring, it was said, more about this than food. His message was always simple and short, and each day became simpler and shorter until finally it was reduced to the words, “Little children, love one another.”

As the German dramatist, G. E. Lessing, tells the story, the first time those words were heard, they had a marvelous effect on the congregation. So also the second time, and the third and the fourth, the people thinking that the weak old man could not say anything more. But when the old man now and then had good and cheerful days, and still said nothing more, and still had nothing further for the daily assembly than, “Little children, love one another”; when they saw that it was not that the old man was only able

to say these words, but that he deliberately chose not to say more, then “Little children, love one another,” became insipid, flat, meaningless. The brethren and disciples could hardly listen any more without feeling sick of it, and finally had the audacity to ask the good old man, “But, Master, why do you always say the same thing?” John replied, “Because it is the Lord’s command; because this alone, this alone, if it is done, is enough, is sufficient and adequate.”

Saint John: Apostle—the Apostle of Love—a worthy patron for any church!

II.

And yet if we are not careful, we might fall into thinking of John as the grandfather of the 1960’s, the patron saint of the Liverpool lads who filled the world with their singing:

All you need is love, love;
Love is all you need.

But unlike the empty idealism and romanticism of the Beatles, Saint John knew that love does not come naturally or easily. The Beatles quickly fell apart with financial squabbling. We have recently witnessed the conflagration of South Central LA. It looks now as though the internal tensions of Czechoslovakia will tear it apart, much like Yugoslavia and the U.S.S.R. [We can easily fill in more contemporary allusions.] The world is deeply divided, and sad to say, its antagonisms are often reflected in the splintering of the Church as well. New denominations pop up daily. We should easily understand that if it is true in any sense that “love is all you need,” we must declare virtual bankruptcy as far as that currency is concerned. Real love is a commodity in short supply.

Saint John would not be surprised. He had to learn to love. The Son of Thunder was only slowly transformed into the Apostle of Love. He became a saint but gradually and not easily, and in the end he surely knew that sainthood and holiness are like moonshine, the source of which is not in itself but in another. The brightness of the moon is only testimony to the infinitely greater light of the sun, and so little is its brightness its own, that any object passing betwixt between the two, as does the earth from time to time, immediately darkens the face of the moon. [There had been an eclipse the previous week]. Love like moonlight is ultimately derived from another.

John's second title tells us of the bright source of that love which he himself reflected. In the liturgical churches John is known by a dual title: Saint John, the Apostle and Evangelist. Evangelist is used here, of course, not with its contemporary connotation, but refers to John as the author of the Evangel of John, which we call the Gospel of John. In his Gospel as well as in his three Epistles and in the Book of the Revelation, John speaks most fully and profoundly of the origin and source of all love.

He begins before the beginning and tells of the eternal Word who was with God and was God: God creator, God incarnate, the very pouring forth of the heart of God, the outgoing of God's innermost being, the Son given for the salvation of the world, the Lamb of God slain to take away its sin, true Light in a world of darkness, Truth in a world of lies, Life in a world of death. God incarnate, God crucified, God risen and triumphant, God forever praised: "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and wealth, wisdom and might, honor and glory and blessing" (Rev. 5:12). From the first words of his Gospel, "In the beginning was the Word" to the last words of the Revelation, "Even so come Lord Jesus," John the Evangelist tells the story of a love like no other.

John Chrysostom said the John the Evangelist, no longer a Son of Thunder, "was a man speaking under heaven who uttered a voice plainer than Thunder, for he pervaded the whole world with his sound and occupied and filled it, not by the loudness of his cry, but by moving his tongue with the grace of God." With his grace-moved tongue John was an Apostle and Evangelist indeed.

III.

There was a third title by which John was known in the early Church. He was often called simply, "The Theologian," and indeed it is said that the Gospel of John had a more profound effect on the later shaping of Church dogma than any other writing. The Gospel of John scales the theological heights of God's self-revelation in Christ. Saint Augustine again speaks of John as a lofty mountain:

He had risen above all the peaks of the earth,
 he had risen above all the plains of the sky,
 he had risen above all the heights of the stars,
 he had risen above all the choirs and legions of the angels.
 For unless he rose above all things which were created,
 he would not arrive at him by whom all things were made.

We have not time to speak of the heights of his theology, nor of the depths of his spirituality, which is, of course, its flip side. But let us touch ever so briefly on one particularly relevant aspect of his theology, namely, his doctrine of the Church.

John, the Apostle of Love, who wrote with profound eloquence of the source of this love in the eternal love of the Father for the Son, the love enfleshed in Jesus Christ and poured out through the Holy Spirit, spoke also with profound eloquence of the Community of Love whose beginning and end is the eternal love of the triune God. The Community, the Church, is the embodiment of that “Love divine, all love’s excelling.” As the eternal love of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is embodied in the divine unity of the Godhead, so that same eternal love binds together as one that people who have heard and received the Word of God in Christ. Thus Jesus, praying with his disciples in John 17, but beholding in his mind’s eye you and me here in this place, entreats the Father:

But it is not for these alone that I pray, but for those also who through their words put their faith in me; may they be one: as thou Father, art in me and I in thee, so also may they be in us, that the world may believe that thou has sent me. The glory that thou has given to me, I have given to them, that the world may be one as we are one; I in them and thou in me, may they be perfectly one. Then the world will learn that thou didst send me, that thou didst love them as thou didst me.

(John 17:20-23)

One small facet of the mountain, integrally related to all the rest. There is no time to explore this. We are just glancing at the photograph. At a later time we will explore at least the lower slopes of this side of the mountain. But now we see enough to know that Saint John, the Apostle of Love, who is also the Evangelist whose Gospel displays the source of that love, is, as well, the Theologian who would lead us to be the embodiment of that love, the beloved Community of the beloved Apostle of the beloved Son who is Love Incarnate, even Jesus Christ our Lord.

I know not what kind of holy inspiration lies behind your name, but I do believe it is holy indeed. You have both the distinct honor and the hallowed responsibility to be called the Church of Saint John: Apostle, Evangelist, Theologian.

*All glory be to God above;
he sent apostles in his love
whose teaching broke the clouds of night
and leads us on to heaven’s light.*

Sermon preached by the Rev'd Fr. Voris G. Brookshire on the Third Sunday after Easter, May 3, 2009, at the Anglican Catholic Church of Saint John the Theologian, Pompano Beach, FL. Copyright © 2009.