**Jesus Through the Eyes of John**

**So we come to the end of the series of the four gospels and arrive at the** Gospel of St John. And how different John’s gospel is from the other three. Matthew, Mark and Luke are, as I am sure you have been told are so similar that they are called the Synoptics which means ‘taking a common view’. St John’s tells the same story – the significance of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. But it tells it differently. The chronological order, for example is different. I guess that most of us think of Jesus overturning the tables in Temple as something that happened on Palm Sunday after he had ridden on the donkey in what was to be his final journey to Jerusalem and his death. But John has it right at the beginning. Probably because he wants to make a theological, symbolic point – that Jesus came to overturn the old order and replace it with God’s new thing.

That is the thing about John’s account. He is not so much concerned with the exact chronology of events but with their significance. Imagine the difference between a newspaper account of a World War One battle such as the Battle of Somme and a poem by Wilfred Owen about the same battle. One gives bare facts. The other probes deeply into the experience and the significance of it. This isn’t a totally fair comparison because none of the gospels were actually eye witness accounts. They are all a result of much pondering and sharing of the story to reflect on the meaning of Jesus’s life. It’s just that St John’s Gospel is even more pondered and reflected upon than the other three.

We see that very clearly in the most important chronological difference between them. The timing of the crucifixion. The Synoptics all tell the story of the Last Supper as the Passover meal, the annual Jewish celebration of the ancient Israelites being led out of Egyptian slavery by God and. Of course, they tell of how Jesus re-interpreted that meal as a new covenant between God, and the new Passover became our Holy Communion. John has no bread and wine. They have supper and then he washes his disciples’ feet. Then what are known as the Final Discourses – lengthy speeches which are surely not what Jesus said on that night. They have come out of years of preaching and reflecting. Then we are told that it was the day of preparation of the Passover. That was the say on which the lamb selected for the Passover meal was chosen and killed for the next day’s meal. So, according to John, Jesus dies at the same time that the lambs were being chosen and killed. The Synoptics have Jesus re-interpreting the Passover meal of bread and wine. John’s gospel has Jesus actually being the Passover itself –

Paschal lamb by God appointed All our sins on thee were laid By almighty love anointed Thou hast full salvation made

as the hymn writer expressed it.

John is not so much concerned about giving a historical account but about the theology of who Jesus was – the one who has fulfilled all the Old Testament rituals and promises – ‘Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world ’as John the Baptist declares at the beginning of the gospel.

It is the only place in any of the gospels where that declaration is made. John is not concerned with the stories of the man Jesus of Nazareth so much as with the declaration that Jesus was the Son of God himself, willingly becoming the sacrifice which reconciled us to God. John is concerned to show that Jesus was God living on earth – the way he writes the gospel shows the miraculous signs which reveal God’s glory on earth, a glory which is summed up by the claims Jesus makes – I am the Light of the word, I am the resurrection and the life, I am the Shepherd etc., the very phrase ‘I am’ echoing the name which God uses of himself when Moses asks for his name – Tell them ‘I am’ has sent you. ‘Before Abraham was, I am’., as Jesus says in John’s gospel.

John is concerned to show that Jesus was, is, God. Nowhere do you see that more clearly than in possibly the most famous words of John’s Gospel - the Prologue. ‘In the beginning was the Word and the Word was God’. An opening which deliberately echoes the first words of Genesis. ‘In the beginning God’. In the beginning, according to John was the Word of God which finally came to express itself as the man, Jesus of Nazareth. Mark had begun his gospel with the time that Jesus had begun his ministry, Matthew’s gospel (written for Jews) had made him a son of Abraham, the founder of the Jewish nation. Luke, writing for the Gentiles had made him a son of Adam who had relevance for all the human race. But John takes him back to before the world began. John declares him to be God himself.

It was for this reason that John the evangelist was compared to an eagle. It was believed that eagles could soar up to the sun and not be blinded. John’s gospel, it was said soars to the heights of divinity and describes them.

Not that the gospel ignores the humanness of Jesus. Indeed some of the most human descriptions of Jesus are in this gospel. What more human encounter than the meeting between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, an encounter which shows that as a human being he needed help. He asked her for the drink of water. It is in John’s gospel that Jesus weeps at the death of his friend, Lazarus. And, in one of my favourite passages we get a glimpse of the reality of the family home and the tension between himself and his brothers who did not believe in him (chapter 7). The evangelist John may push the claims of Jesus as divine to the extreme. But he does the same with his assertion that Jesus was really, vulnerably human. Indeed John declares throughout the whole gospel what he sums up so powerfully – The Word (which is God) became human and lived among us.

Tradition says that John, in obedience to Jesus’s instructions from the cross took Mary the mother of Jesus into his home, left Jerusalem and settled together in Ephesus in Turkey. The church of Ephesus was the beginnings of the stream of Christianity which became the Eastern Orthodox church and the Celtic church, a stream which places great emphasis on the all embracing nature of God’s love, that the whole of creation will be reconciled through the love of God. That is in keeping with the identification of John as the disciple of love, the Beloved disciple, the one whom Jesus loved.

That tradition has been picked up and interpreted for this day and age. For it has been suggested that in the first centuries of the church the emphasis was placed on St Peter as the head of the church as the Papacy became supreme. Then along came the Reformation and the conversion of St Paul became the major focus. Being obedient to the church was not good enough. Having a personal encounter with Christ which brought assurance of being saved by grace made the years after the Reformation ‘the age of Paul’. Now, it is suggested that we are moving into the age of John, the evangelist of love.

What does that mean? To understand, we must turn to the final chapter of the gospel. Peter is being called again to be the head of the church. He is being given the instruction to care for the sheep, those in the fold and to feed them with the truth of God. He is also told that such a calling will result in his being taken to places he does not want to go and ultimately to his death. John, the Beloved disciple is standing near by and Peter turns to him and says to Jesus, “What about him? What’s going to happen to him?”.

And Jesus replies, “Mind your own business. That’s got nothing to do with you. It’s between me and him”. Peter is called to be the leader of the church but that calling brings with it the demand for humble obedience and self-sacrifice. And the very last words we hear from the Lord to the leader of his church is a good reprimand!

So, if Peter represents the church, who does John represent in this scene? He is the apostle most associated with love, the beloved disciple. He represents those who live by love. Those who try to put love into practice in their lives and who are thus in tune with God who is Love and who spoke that word of love most eloquently in becoming Jesus of Nazareth and living among us. But they may not necessarily ever come under the umbrella of the church, represented by Peter.

John finishes his gospel by describing a tension, a creative tension. The church is divinely ordained by Christ and must stay faithful to Him. But his love is not contained in, nor exhausted by, the church. He is present in all those who live by love. What exactly is his relationship with them, and his opinion of them is between Him and them and not something that the church knows anything about. But, note carefully, this is not saying as some do now that all religions and philosophies are the same and you choose which one suits you. John’s gospel ends with a mighty declaration of the divinity and authority of Jesus Christ – the Messiah, the Son of God, the only one who brings eternal life. It is that the all embracing love of God expresses itself both through the church and all those who live by love.

So, if the church before the Reformation called be called the Age of Peter, the church after the Reformation the Age of Paul maybe we are moving into a new re-forming of what it means to be the church and it is characterised by the awareness of the love of God streaming through all of creation. That awareness will be lived out by both those who specifically name Jesus as God and those who do not but who try to live lives shaped by love. The Age of John.

John’s Gospel is often referred to as the mystical gospel, the one which is not trying to present historical fact but to speak of a direct experience with God who is mysterious and yet knowable. I am doing a lot of work at the moment around the theme of the new Reformation as we draw close to commemorating the 500th anniversary of the first reformation led by Martin Luther. A few weeks ago, I was looking up about his life and found that he was born in a place called Eisleben, previously famous for a Catholic convent which had three women mystics who testified of direct encounters with God. One of them, from the thirteenth century, the abbess Gertrude, had visions and experiences of meeting with John the Evangelist as well as with Christ. On one occasion she felt herself leaning on the breast of Jesus just as the Beloved Disciple had done at the last supper. And she heard the heartbeat of Jesus and knew she was hearing the beat of God’s heart for all the world. When she again encountered John in a mystical experience, she asked him if he had heard Jesus’s heartbeat and when he replied that he had, she asked him why did he not write that in his gospel. “It was my task to tell the world that the Word had been made flesh. There will come a future generation whose task will be to tell that God’s sacred heart beats with love for all of the world. And that sacred heartbeat was heard on earth in the breast of Jesus”.

I dare to suggest that we are that future generation and that our calling is to bring in the next re-forming of the kingdom and church of God by living out the gospel of the evangelist John, the Apostle of Love.

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