

S John

After Christmas we plunge immediately into a familiar catalogue of saints. Stephen yesterday, John today, and even the Holy Innocents tomorrow, remind us to relate the birth of the Christ Child to Christian life, death and truth, lest we treat the incarnation as a pretty tableau for children, undifferentiated from Santa and Oxford Street.

Tradition says that S. John, the author of the fourth gospel, was the only one of the Apostles and Evangelists who did not suffer martyrdom. We are told that he died peacefully in old age (one source even refers to his Assumption), which is why we celebrate him in white, rather than the red of Apostles & Evangelists who are also Martyrs. S. John, in the midst of this triduum of Christmas saints, reminds us that martyrdom is not primarily about death, but about *witness* and *perseverance*.

The first letter of John, from which our second reading was taken, conveys wonderfully that sense of perseverance in witness, in its reiteration of the great Christmas theme of the fourth gospel's opening chapter:

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—
2 this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us— ...

5 This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. 1 John 1

John never wavered from his glimpse of glory, a knowledge and vision of God in which he survived other people's attempts to give him a more conventional martyrdom. According to Alban Butler,

St Jerome writes that when age and weakness grew upon him at Ephesus so that he was no longer able to preach to the people, he used to be carried to the assembly of the faithful, and every time he said to his flock only these words: 'My little children, love one another'. When they asked him why he always repeated the same words he replied, 'Because it is the word of the Lord, and if you keep it you do enough.' St John died in peace at Ephesus about the third year of Trajan, that is the hundredth of the Christian era, being then ninety-four years old, according to St Epiphanius.

That *obit* further illuminates our honouring of John so close to Christmas.

For me, though, it is the careful and scrupulous concluding words of his gospel that set the seal on John as a human instrument of divine truth. The final vignette which we've just heard sung, in which the author appears as the unnamed beloved disciple, merges beautifully with our celebration of the Incarnation into which he had gazed so deeply, on which he had reflected so subtly, and to which he had so long borne witness. There is so much to value in S. John's legacy to us: the care in detail and proper interpretation, the protestation of accuracy and truthful report, but above all that final insistence on the open-endedness of the revelation of God in Christ Jesus:

there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

That is the key to the Gospel (capital G), to scripture and to the Word made flesh. Scripture may be *sufficient*, in our reforming forebears' cautious formulation, but it is neither an exhaustive or nor a complete revelation of God, or salvation history, or God's will for us. Only God in God's very self can be that fullness, his ineffable sweetness and beauty expressed for us in the Word made Flesh.

The new covenant in Christ moves us beyond a security-blanket approach to God, which issues in exclusion and cliquery. Too much attention is still being paid to the peripheral bits of our heritage which do that. If we listened to the simple sermon of the aged John we might more quickly get past our sad divisions and our equally sad tendency to cling to faith as our *possession*. The Church belongs to God, not to us.

Beginnings and endings are carefully placed clues to the messages of ancient literature as they are in modern writing. John's first words, which we hear on Christmas morning, echo Genesis and focus on God: 'In the beginning was the Word'. And he leaves us with his own claim to be a witness, a true martyr of truth, while highlighting the limitations of his project: the Good News, he insists, cannot be *contained* by this medium, inspired scripture though it may be. At his own end, tradition relates that *he* relied solely on the commandment to love, which, he also teaches us, is the essential being and substance of God. That helps us to realise that we, even I, can be divinised (just as God became fully human), not by the bread of scripture alone, but 'by *every* word that proceeds from the mouth of God', by our living encounter with the living God ('for he is God not of the dead but of the living'), in Word and Sacrament, in our life as the Church. Barbara Brown Taylor summarises John's Gospel as 'follow the Bread and it will lead you to the source of all life.' John's is the Gospel of the Mass, of our lively encounter with the living God.

A martyr without a martyr's death; a gospel writer who dares to give us the interpretation along with the story; a lover of God in his bright glory who could see what God was doing in his coming among us in muddier human form *and* could see the glory here, in us, however inchoate; a beloved friend to Jesus such as *we* might profitably aspire to be. Who better to celebrate as we strive afresh to integrate our lives with the glorious promise of life through death, which has its seed in the human birth of God.