

St. John and the Mystery of the Incarnation

Preached on the Feast of St. John, Apostle and Evangelist

Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ

Dec. 27, 2020

Text: 1st John 1: 1-10

Today we are celebrating the Feast of St. John, Apostle and Evangelist. St. John is clearly one of the great figures of the history of Christianity. But like so many of God's saints, he was a little rough around the edges. John and his brother James were singled out by Jesus in Mark 3:17 when He referred to them as "Sons of Thunder." You don't get a nickname like Sons of Thunder for no reason. But that is how Jesus' disciples, James and John, were known. They were rough-hewn men—amazing, colorful characters. They would not back away from a confrontation. In fact, they might even have looked forward to one. They could be very aggressive, and also very insensitive.

On one occasion, when the people in a village of Samaria were not responsive to the message of Jesus, it was James and John who wanted to call down fire from heaven on them (see Luke 9:54). When Jesus spoke of His own impending death, about how he would be betrayed and then handed over to the Gentiles to be mocked, spit upon, scourged, and ultimately killed, James and John blurted out,

"Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask. . . . Grant us that we may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on Your left, in Your glory" (Mark 10:35, 37 NKJV).

Was that a good time to bring this up? It would be like saying, "Really? Could I have your car?" to someone who just found out they had one week to live. These brothers just spoke without thinking. They were hopelessly human, with flaws and deficits, just like us.

But God transformed them. And at the end of their lives, these men, these Sons of Thunder, became known for something else. James was the first apostle to be martyred. And John became known as the apostle of love. He was the author of the Gospel of John as well as the epistles of 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John. God made James and John into different people than they were before—and He can do the same for us.

John was one of the three singled out among the apostles by the Lord to be present at both his Transfiguration and his suffering in Gethsemane. He alone among the apostles was present at the culmination of Christ's life at Calvary. And when the Lord wanted to trust someone with all he had left in this world—his own Mother—he chose John.

But, as great a saint as he is, within this Christmas octave, we have to ask the practical question: Why, of the 365 days of the liturgical calendar, was the feast of St. John the Evangelist established two days after the birth of Christ? To celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family or the Feast of the Holy Innocents within the Christmas octave seems

logical because of their intrinsic connection to the birth of Christ. To celebrate the memorials of SS. Thomas Becket and Sylvester during this period is straightforward, considering they died on the days the Church remembers them. It perhaps would have made more sense to celebrate that great Evangelist of the Lord's Infancy, St. Luke, during this period in which we hear from him more than any another of the four Gospel writers. But from the earliest calendars, we find celebrated the martyr Stephen on the day after Christmas, and St. John on the 27th, although no documents coming to us from the early centuries give any reason to believe these would have been the dates on which they would have died. So the question recurs: why now?

It could be that the early Church established the feast of St. John two days after Christmas because John, better than any of the Evangelists, captured for us in his Gospel both the divine and human natures of the infant we adore in the Bethlehem stable.

Almost everywhere you see the saint we celebrate today depicted, you see him associated with what since the time of St. Irenaeus has been his definitive symbol: the eagle. Irenaeus applied the four figures we find in Ezekiel (1:10) and the Book of Revelation (4:7)—man, lion, ox and eagle—respectively to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. John was the eagle, so Irenaeus and those after him affirmed, because his Gospel soared into the ethereal heights of Christological mysticism. Nothing in the Synoptics can possibly compare with the poetic profundity of John's lofty prologue, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." The baby lying in the manger was indeed he "who was from the beginning."

But if we were to stop here we would get an incomplete picture both of John and of Christ. Because in John's writings, the eagle has landed. The celestial theology has come down to earth. The Word has become flesh and dwells among us. He proclaims the one "whom we have heard, whom we have seen with our eyes, whom we have looked upon and our hands have touched." The eternal Godhead has taken on human nature and has become one of us, in all things but sin. He lives with us and our senses truly testify to his presence. St. John has landed on the true representation of Christ that captures both his divine and human realities.

And how important it is for us to keep our eyes fixed on both realities when we behold the Child, because too often over the course of history and still today, Christians have emphasized one aspect of Christ to the exclusion of the other, and this has led to great heresies. In the early Church, the Docetists and Gnostics focused on Jesus' divinity to the exclusion of any humanity at all. They believed that Jesus only *appeared* to be human, as if wearing some disguise. Today, there are still huge Platonic streaks in Christianity, which consider the flesh and corporality bad or morally worthless and therefore look on Christ and man through Greek lenses. Others use John's mystical Gospel as a means to adopt an "intellectual" Christianity that allows a wide variety of belief to the exclusion of traditional teachings on how Christians should view the body and sexual expression.

On the other hand, there are plenty of heresies concerning those who uphold Jesus' humanity to the exclusion of his divinity. Arius was the most famous historical booster

for this position, but other variants abound. For modern liberation theologians, the divinity of Jesus is set aside and replaced by Jesus as a human political liberator. Of course, there are also those who deny that Jesus is the Lord of nature, ruling out the possibility that he could perform miracles. And last but not least—the most common strain today—are those who say that Christ was simply a really good man, who taught a good ethic, etc.

Now all of these heresies will stress one side of Jesus to the detriment of others. It seems very human to avoid intellectual and spiritual tension by trying to eliminate it. Many of us do not like to accept mystery and our human limitations in comprehending God. But this attempt to “clean up” these mysteries leaves our complete salvation in doubt, as St. Athanasius and others have pointed out. And it is clearly a mystery how the Second person of the Blessed Trinity can take on human flesh and become fully human in the womb of a virgin. But it happened. And we adore this Truth made flesh in all his awesome mysterious majesty alongside his Mother, the shepherds, Magi, beasts and angels. At this Mass today, we go even further. As St. John himself reminded us in his Gospel, Jesus said, “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood,” you will have no life in you.” At this altar, the Word who was from the beginning takes on flesh again, and we receive not just this flesh, not just his blood, but his soul and divinity as well. Such a reality so exceeds our understanding that it can only be received with eternal gratitude.

In the Name...