

ST JOHN'S CATHEDRAL PORTSMOUTH 22 JULY 2010
MASS FOR THE UNVEILING OF THE SCULPTURE OF ST JOHN

Not many of the first disciples of Jesus died in their beds. Yet tradition has it that John did so. It is said that he settled in Ephesus died there in old age.

So we have many images in which to think of John, and names too.

Today's Gospel passage depicts him full of youthful vigour, easily outstripping Peter in their race to the tomb, to the dawn of the new age of truth and grace. Yet we also imagine him as an old man, fashioning a Gospel full of the fruit of meditation and wisdom.

His name, in Hebrew, means 'God is gracious'. He is called the 'disciple whom Jesus loved' (21.7). We see him resting his head on Jesus breast at the Last Supper. He is the first to recognise the risen Lord. Yet he is also the younger brother of James, child of Zebedee and Salome. He is one of the 'Sons of Thunder'. And his symbol is that of an eagle: high soaring, clear sighted and very purposeful.

Central to that purpose, to everything he said and wrote, is the mystery of Christ, the Eternal Word of God, in our flesh. The prologue to his Gospel, and the words we have just heard from his First Letter, make that priority clear:

'Something we have heard and we have seen with our own eyes; that we have touched with our hands, the Word, who is life – this is our subject'. (1 John 1.1-2)

This truth arrested his soul, with a grip that never slackened, when he glanced into the empty tomb. He tells us: 'Till that moment they had failed to understand.' But at that moment, 'he saw and he believed' (John 20.9). It was love at first sight, total and fulfilling.

At the tomb he entered the sacred ground which we all seek. There he understood, not only that the man he had known and loved, touched and heard, was God-in-our-flesh, but also that his coming was to enable us to share that divine life, in itself the fulfilment of our own.

This he proclaims in the short, powerful statements scattered throughout his Gospel: 'I am the resurrection. If anyone believes in me even though he dies he will live.' (11.25) 'Eternal life is this: to know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.' (17.3)

These are words of bold proclamation, and a vision of the grandeur of humanity, connected with God, brought to its fulfilment.

These are the messages expressed in the raised right hand of this dramatic new sculpture, unveiled today. The finger of John's right hand points to God, raising mind and heart to that source of all grandeur. Yet, at the same time, the left hand grasps the anchor, that symbol of our humanity, of sweaty endeavour. An anchor is well understood here in Portsmouth with its docks and proud naval tradition. The faith

being proclaimed by John is no abstract theory, detached from daily life. Nor is it a form of pious escapism, turning its back on the harshness of human existence. No, this Christian faith teaches us, again and again, that the highest glory of our humanity is found within our earthly reality, in the person of Jesus, who unites heaven and earth, who transforms what might seem mundane or even brutal, into a hymn of praise to God and a pathway to the fullness of life.

But the raised hand of John might also stand for something else.

His first Letter was written to the young churches of Asia, threatened with disintegration under the impact of early heresies. It is, obviously, a letter of great encouragement, urging us to walk in the light of Christ and keep the key commandment of love. It also contains warnings: that there are false prophets, who speak the language 'of the world' (4.5) and who are listened to 'by the world.' But we, he warns, 'have been anointed with truth, not with a lie, and as it has taught you, you must stay in him.' (2.27)

So the hand of the statue is also a warning: do not be separated from God, from Jesus. To enter into that separation is to risk all. History tells, not least in the horrors of the last century, that when we are forgetful of God we quickly become forgetful of each other. When a state seeks to destroy God, sooner or later it destroys its people and itself. The raised hand is eloquent. 'Do not forget God, who watches over you with love, because if you do you will go awry.'

This statue of St John, and his title of Evangelist, makes clear that we too have a task of evangelisation, of bringing the Gospel of life to our society today.

What does John himself teach us about how to engage in this task?

There are, it seems to me, two ways in which John goes about his task from which we can learn.

First, he is far-seeing. He is not content with the horizon of the immediate, with the short or medium-term perspective. As a soaring eagle, he wants us to see the whole picture. So he speaks about Christ as the Word through whom all things are made, as the one who gives meaning to everything. He tells Nathaniel 'You will see heaven laid open' (1.51). He tells us that God gives us the power to become children of God – nothing less! His focus is on origins and destiny: the great, majestic questions which either raise us up in joyful hope or, if we cannot answer them, cast us down into a despondency and sense of pointlessness.

He takes this search for meaning a step further. For St John, events are described not just for their own sake, but precisely because they yield far deeper meanings. They are not simply happenings, they are signs, signs of the truth that can be so easily lost if we live unreflective lives, on the surface alone. The wedding feast of Cana; the cleansing of the temple; the healing of the man born blind; the washing of the disciples' feet: these are all dramatic events, worthy of a headline or two. But they are much more. These are the signs that Jesus gave – and there were many others – which point beyond themselves and, when pondered, lead us to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and believing this to have life through his name. (20.31)

There is a second characteristic, too, from which we can learn. As well as being far-sighted, John approaches the tasks of Gospel proclamation through the presentation of dialogues, encounters and conversations which constantly invite us, the hearer, to enter them.

His Gospel is full of such conversations. As each one progresses, the question is being put to us: where do you stand on this?

The conversations are many: with Nicodemus on the meaning of birth; with the Samaritan woman on the real properties of water; with Martha about the meaning of 'resurrection', and with Peter, Thomas, Philip and Judas, at the last supper, about the experience of trust, about the journey we are face and about the Spirit who is to come. And, of course, he has that dialogue with Pilate about the meaning of Truth.

Here, perhaps, are lessons for us today.

The Gospel is to be proclaimed through a patient and respectful dialogue, a willingness to engage with the soul-searching questions of our day. What might they be? Questions about truth and where it is to be found; about the nature and meaning of beauty; about the purpose of life and its protection; about the deeper meaning of refreshment, prosperity and riches; about the quest for peace and the need for forgiveness. Such dialogue requires attentiveness, not only to the words of another, but especially to the deeper, underlying consequences of events and courses of action. At one level they might seem both attractive and spectacular. But they will have their own underlying meaning and implications, for good or for evil, which always have to be discerned.

Conversation as the way of the Gospel does not exclude the raised right hand: raised both in clear proclamation and in warning, but never without its counter-balance, a shared grip on the anchor, on the tasks of patiently shaping a better society and a kinder world.

There is rope in this sculpture, too. It is the working rope of the sailor or fisherman. Its presence reminds us that the Christian faith does indeed bind us, but not so much to a doctrine as to a person; not simply to an ethical code but to a way of loving obedience and that through such bonds of love the body of Christ today is held together in the Church, as a true sign of hope.

Peter, in his old age, accepted the ropes of imprisonment and execution. Perhaps John was excused them, but he carried the same bonds of love. They were not imprisoning. Rather, they gave him the freedom of love, the ability to soar to great heights and bear such powerful witness to the greatness of human life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Faith in God is not a problem to be solved: rather it is a gift to be discovered afresh in our society today.

May St John the Evangelist continue to inspire us and touch all who pause in their busy days to gaze on his new statue. Amen.

+Vincent Nichols