

# John – Apostle and Evangelist

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John – Apostle and Evangelist – Prov 8 22-31, Ps 97 1, Jn 1 1-15, Jn 20 2-8

In 2012, Vicky and I visited the site of Ephesus; a great city which had stood on the Mediterranean coast of modern-day Türkiye. In Jesus' time, Ephesus boasted the Temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. (See *Acts 19 for Paul's encounter with the Artemis cult*) Near Ephesus we saw two sites revered as the burial places of Mary, Jesus' mother, and John, the beloved disciple, Apostle and Evangelist. You'll recall how on the Cross, Jesus gave them to each other as mother and son. <sup>(Jn 19.26)</sup> So it makes sense to find their graves close to each other.

Living in Ephesus, John inhabited two cultures, like we do today. John straddled the Jewish traditions of his homeland, and the Græco-Roman ways of Asia Minor. We live a similar dual life. We inhabit the deeply symbolic expressions and traditions of our Christian faith, and also a cosmopolitan western culture that has practically no idea what we're about. We're viewed with anything from good-humoured tolerance of our peculiarities right through to deep resentment and contempt. It's in this environment, and with our self-imposed constraints, that we bear witness to Jesus. What might our patron John teach us about doing this?

John has left us plenty of material; his Gospel, three letters, and possibly also the Book of Revelation. A major theme in his writing – one which we encounter today – is **seeing and believing**. The central moment in our Gospel today was that the beloved disciple **saw and believed**. Likewise, in his first letter, we heard him say ...<sup>1 2</sup> *this [eternal] 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.* So being an eyewitness to what Jesus reveals, *seeing, believing and bearing witness*, is John's life's work: Apostle – sent out, and Evangelist – bearer of the Good News.

But what's that to us? We're not eyewitnesses. The Melbourne Jesuit Bible scholar, Brendan Byrne argues <sup>(JSNT 23 pp 83-97)</sup> that in today's Gospel, after that running race to the tomb with Peter, we should be careful to remember that what they saw there was an empty tomb; *the linen wrappings lying there, ' and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.* They didn't see the resurrected Jesus – not yet. But even so, the beloved disciple *saw and believed*. Peter wouldn't get it for some time yet. But our John did.

Later in this chapter, when Thomas received the proof of his own eyes and hands to enable him to believe, <sup>(20.27)</sup> Jesus pointedly blesses those – us – who have not seen, and yet have come to believe. <sup>(20 29)</sup>

So today, John who doesn't see, yet believes, just like us – John calls us to risk trusting our inner sight. The theme that unites this whole chapter is seeing and believing. And we are called to look through the eyes of the people in this story.

The beloved disciple outran Peter. John got to the tomb first. But whether he meant to show deference to his older friend, or he was overcome by a moment of shocked paralysis after glancing inside at the scene which greeted them, in those few moments, something huge happened in John.

It wasn't like him to hold back. He'd gone with Jesus into the courtyard of the High Priest while Peter stayed outside, <sup>(18.15)</sup> he'd stood by Jesus with Jesus' mother and the other Marys at the foot of the Cross, <sup>(19.25-26)</sup> while Peter was nowhere to be

seen.

So this pause at the mouth of the tomb was uncharacteristic for John. Something huge was happening inside the beloved disciple. And the call of the Gospel that he and his community have left us is to see through his eyes, let the scene do its work in us, and together with him, move deeper into faith. Whatever it was that he saw conquered on that early morning stands before us too. For us as for John, our way is into the gift – not the work – *the gift* of deeper faith.

The Welsh poet and Anglican priest, Ronald Stuart Thomas described this in the final lines from his poem, *The Answer*.

...There have been times when  
after long on my knees in a cold chancel, a stone has rolled  
from my mind, and I have looked  
in and seen the old questions lie  
folded and in a place  
by themselves, like the piled  
graveclothes of love's risen body.

John, our patron invites us to believe deeper into Christ. And his reason is what we heard in his letter this morning. He tells what he has seen and heard so that others may enter this fellowship with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ – that others may share such joy.

Just like John, we live in two contrasting cultures. And thanks to John, we see through his eyes what it means to live that life in company with the Jesus he knows: Jesus who celebrates with us <sup>(Jn 2.1-11)</sup>, Jesus who cleanses us <sup>(2.13-22)</sup>, Jesus who brings us to new birth <sup>(3.1-21)</sup>, Jesus who crosses cultural

divides, <sup>(4.1-42)</sup> who puts religious taboos in their place and stands with the lost and needy. <sup>(4.46-5.18)</sup> John has seen and told about Jesus the creator who feeds the hungry <sup>(6.1-14)</sup>, about Jesus the healer, <sup>(Ch 9)</sup> about his compassion, <sup>(8.1-11, 11.28-43)</sup>. John had told us that in the shadows of the spiritual night, Jesus the Good Shepherd lies across the gateway of our souls; a living gate, strong in the face of despair and even death itself. <sup>(10.7-10)</sup>

What might John ask of us who bear his name – St John's?

John's Hebrew name, יוחנן (Yochanan), means 'God is gracious' – 'God gives undeserved gifts'. That's a joy we discover daily in God's beautiful creation. A community of Christ, hearts and hands overflowing with the riches of God's grace. And like John, our call is to hand those gifts on – gifts which can pour through us from the never ending wellspring of God's grace.

Let's all read John's Gospel and his letters again. We are a community of Christ as John was, in a very different world, yet ours is similarly often apathetic and hostile too. Like John, we have not seen and yet we believe. Because of John and our more recent forbears, we embody a culture as a Christian community of love, respect, compassion, generosity, humility, peace, vision, and joy. This culture springs from a living relationship with Jesus; the one who John reveals to be the eternal Word, our Way, our Truth and our Life.

I pray that together, we may believe deeper into Christ, and be living bearers of God's Grace to all whom John has shown us Jesus loves so deeply. Amen.