

THE APOSTLE JOHN

The Beloved Apostle

Perfecting the Love of God in Us

September 26, 2009

GOSPEL: John 19:25-27, 21:24-25

EPISTLE: 1 John 4:12-19

BACKGROUND: THE LIFE OF JOHN

John's Family

John, son of Zebedee, and his brother, James were the grandsons of Joseph, the betrothed of the Virgin Mary. John's mother, Salome, was one of the myrrh-bearing women. She was also Jesus' stepsister and was a very close confidante of the Virgin Mary. It was quite natural for the Lord to entrust the care of His mother to John at the cross (John 19:25-27) since Mary and Salome were such close friends. Throughout John's Gospel, he refers to himself as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 13:23, 19:26, 20:2, 21:7, 20) and this is the subject of the Gospel lesson. John was probably the youngest of the 12. Being Jesus' relative (either step-nephew or second cousin, once removed), he was treated very tenderly by the Lord (John 13:23-25).

John was one of a number of the Twelve Apostles who were fishermen by trade. This included his brother James, Thomas, Nathanael, Peter and Andrew, plus others (John 21:2). His father, Zebedee, ran the fishing business, and there were a number of hired servants who helped with the day-to-day tasks (Mark 1:19-20). Most of the fish caught were taken to the city of Magdala for salting to preserve freshness, but some fish were sold fresh locally. Fish was a major part of the diet of 1st Century Palestine, and fresh fish commanded a very good price. Recent studies of the operations of the 1st Century fishing industry indicate that the owner of a fishing business had a good income, equivalent to upper middle class today. For more details about the 1st Century fishing industry see Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, "Fishers of Fish, Fishers of Men", Bible Review, June 1999, pp. 22-27, 48. John's mother, Salome, was not mentioned by name as one of the chief supporters of Jesus' public ministry (Luke 8:2-3). However, she was very closely connected to Jesus' ministry (Matthew 20:20-22), and was present at the foot of the Cross and at the Tomb (Mark 15:40, Matthew 27:56). From this we can conclude with reasonable certainty that she was one of the lesser supporters of Jesus' ministry, and that she was not as wealthy as Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna (Luke 8:2-3).

John's family owned property in Jerusalem, and John had his own home (John 19:27) which was located on Mt. Zion according to tradition (Holy Apostles Convent, The Life of the Virgin Mary, p. 417). During Jesus' crucifixion, John was known to the high priest, Caiaphas, and went with Jesus into the courtyard of Annas, the father-in-law of Caiaphas. It is uncertain whether Caiaphas knew John because he was of priestly descent or because of his family wealth. John then went out and spoke to the doorkeeper to let Peter in also (John 18:13-16). John, however, was spared the inquisition that Peter received (John 18:17-27).

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The Jewish rulers, elders and Scribes described the fishermen-turned-Apostles as uneducated and untrained men. This group of Jewish leaders included Annas and Caiaphas (Acts 4:5-13), where the priests and the high priest were from among the Sadducees, who did not believe in a bodily resurrection (Luke 20:27). “Uneducated and untrained” does not mean unintelligent, but only refers to formal training in the Mosaic Law, philosophy and oratory. As a result, these Sadducees marveled that Peter and John, who had no training in oratory, were very eloquent in proclaiming the resurrection of Christ (Acts 4:13).

Accompanying the Lord

John was among Jesus’ “inner circle”, with Peter and James (John’s brother). He was prominent at a number of events during Jesus’ public ministry:

- At the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law (Mark 1:29-31).
- As an Apostle at the ordination of the Twelve (Mark 3:17).
- At the raising of Jairus’ daughter (Mark 5:35-37).
- At the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1, Mark 9:2, Luke 9:28).
- Rebuking someone who cast out demons, but who did not follow Christ (Luke 9:49).
- With his brother James, seeking to call down fire from heaven just like Elijah (2 Kings 1:10-12) on a Samaritan village that wouldn’t receive them (Luke 9:54).
- With James and Salome, asking for the highest place in the Kingdom. This caused the other ten Apostles to be greatly displeased with John and James (Matthew 20:20-24, Mark 10:35-41).
- Asking for private clarification of future events (Mark 13:3).
- Sent ahead by Jesus to prepare the Passover and Last Supper (Luke 22:8).
- Asking Jesus who would betray Him at Peter’s request (John 13:23-26).
- With Peter and James in Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-33).
- As the only one of the Twelve at the Cross, where Jesus assigned to him the care of His mother as a son would normally do (John 19:26-27).
- With Peter, following Jesus after His arrest, and gaining entrance to Annas’ house (John 18:15-16).

Jesus nicknamed John and his brother James “the Sons of Thunder” (Mark 3:17) due to their desire to call down fire from heaven on a Samaritan village that would not receive Jesus (Luke 9:51-56). On the other hand, his Epistles portray him as a gentle old man who emphasized love among the brethren. This is the subject of the Epistle lesson.

John certainly had a desire to understand the depths of the Kingdom of God, and this was reflected in his life. Besides asking for the highest place in the Kingdom (Matthew 20:20-24, Mark 10:35-41), he was very intimate with Christ and recognized some things quicker than the other Apostles. For example, at the tomb, John recognized that the Lord had risen even though they did not understand yet that this is what the Scriptures said (John 20:2-9). He was also first to recognize the Risen Christ at the Sea of Galilee while they were fishing (John 21:6-7). Because of this intimacy, John became known as “the disciple that Jesus loved” (John 21:7, 20). This is not to say that Jesus loved no one else, but that Jesus loved John in a special manner. As part of this intimacy, the Lord showed John many things about the goings-on in heaven and about what will happen in the future. John was even caught up to heaven to see some of these things himself (Revelation 1:10-11, 4:1-11).

John came to be known in later centuries by the name, John the Theologian. This was due to widespread circulation of his Gospel, with an accompanying understanding of the depth of the mystery of God revealed in his writings, which include a Gospel, three Epistles and Revelation.

John lived his entire life in celibacy, as did a number of the Apostles and the Virgin Mary. In doing this, their concentration was on fasting, prayer, overcoming the passions of the flesh and on understanding the Will of God every moment of their lives.

At the end of John's Gospel, he dispelled the rumor that was spreading about hinting that he (John) would never die. This rumor grew out of a misunderstanding of Christ's words to Peter. Jesus had just spoken to Peter, signifying by what death he would glorify God. Peter replied by asking what about John. Jesus said, "If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you?" John pointed out that Jesus did not say that he would not die, but merely, "If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you?" (John 21:19-23).

John's Care of the Virgin Mary After Pentecost

At the foot of the Cross, Jesus assigned the care of His mother to the Apostle John. This was necessary in 1st Century Jewish culture. The oldest son in the family had the "birthright" and was expected to care for his mother for the rest of her life in the event of his father's death. He was given an extra share of the birthright to do this with. Out of this extra share, he was also expected to provide for any unmarried sisters, including their dowry upon marriage (Deuteronomy 21:15-17). Therefore the Virgin Mary lived in John's house along with John's mother, Salome, until her death. This implies that Salome's husband, Zebedee, died shortly after Pentecost.

John was very prominent in the early Church. This was very noticeable to Paul when he came to Jerusalem in c. 48 AD for the Council in Jerusalem regarding the issue of circumcision of the Gentiles (Acts 15). At that time, Paul perceived that James, Peter and John were the pillars of the Jerusalem Church (Galatians 2:9). This James was James the Lord's brother (Galatians 1:19), and not John's brother James. John's brother had already been martyred in 44 AD (Acts 12:1-3).

This prominence can also be seen in the accounts of the miracles performed by the Twelve in Jerusalem in the year following Pentecost. As Peter and John went up to the Temple for 9th Hour Prayers, they healed a man who was lame from birth (Acts 3:1-10). As the Twelve taught in the Temple, it was Peter and John who were arrested for preaching the Resurrection of Christ. In defending themselves before Annas, the high priest, Caiaphas, and the family of the high priest, everyone marveled at the boldness of the speaking of Peter and John (Acts 4:1-19). Later, after the death of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-10), the high priest (and the Sadducees) arrested all of the Twelve Apostles. In their defense, it was Peter and the other Apostles who spoke and not just Peter and John (Acts 5:17-29).

One year to the day after Pentecost, Stephen was stoned (Acts 7:54-60). According to tradition, John and the Virgin Mary watched from a distance, praying for Stephen during his execution. Also from tradition, Deacon Nicanor (Acts 6:5) and 200 others were stoned the same day. These events began a great persecution of the Church at Jerusalem, largely by the hand of the future Apostle Paul (Acts 8:1-3, 22:4-5, 26:10-11, 1 Corinthians 15:9). It was at this time of persecution that most of the Apostles began their various missionary journeys

abroad, and the Twelve Apostles are not mentioned as being together at any time after this. However, John and the Virgin Mary remained in Jerusalem during this persecution.

In about 44 AD, Herod (i.e. Agrippa) began to persecute the Church, killing James, John's brother, with the sword (Acts 12:1). James, like John, had been very eloquent in proclaiming the Resurrection of Christ following his return from Spain. Herod also arrested Peter since he saw it pleased the Jews; but an angel let Peter out of prison at night (Acts 12:3, 7). Peter stopped by at the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where everyone was praying for him. There he told them he was okay; but that he was leaving town, and they should be sure to tell James, the Bishop of Jerusalem (Acts 12:17). From there Peter made his way first to Caesarea and eventually to Antioch. Barnabas brought Paul to Antioch c. 46 AD while Peter was still there (Galatians 2:11-15, Acts 11:25-26).

John and the Virgin Mary left Jerusalem also at the time of Herod's persecution. Since John's lot in the evangelization of the world was Asia Minor, they sailed for Ephesus. There they stayed until the death of Herod (Acts 12:20-23). To put this in context, the Apostle Andrew had already been to Ephesus briefly, but the Apostle Paul would not arrive until 52 AD, at the end of his Second Missionary Journey. Since Herod died not too long after he killed James, John and the Virgin Mary most likely stayed in Ephesus less than two years. As was her custom, the Virgin Mary spent her time in prayer, fasting and meditation on the Scriptures.

John and Mary returned to Jerusalem following the death of Herod, and remained there until the early 50's. About that time, Mary heard that Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha desired to see her very much. Lazarus had been ordained Bishop of Cyprus by the Apostle Barnabas, but did not dare enter Jerusalem for fear of the Jews. It had been over 20 years since the Jewish leaders had tried to kill him; but they still sought to do so (John 12:9-11).

To solve this dilemma, Mary wrote to Bishop Lazarus asking him to send a ship for her so that she might visit him on Cyprus. This he did and the Apostle John with the Virgin Mary and some others set sail for Cyprus. Out at sea, however, they encountered a violent storm that took them far off course and up to the northern part of the Aegean Sea near Macedonia. There, they put in to the port of Clemes on Athos at the tip of the 50-mile long peninsula. At this location today, there are a number of famous monasteries that trace their origin to the visit of John and the Virgin Mary in the early 50's, and most of the information we have concerning the Virgin Mary's voyage comes from these monasteries.

At that time, the population of Athos consisted of young virgins dedicated to the goddess Diana who were expected to become priestesses to serve in the Greek temples. Also on Athos was a large gold and ivory statue of Jupiter on top of the 6,600-foot peak of Mt. Athos. This statue was mentioned in ancient history accounts of Plutarch and Anaximander as having large gems for eyes; it was used for navigation by seamen. Also present on the peninsula was a huge temple of Apollo where fortune telling, divining and witchcraft took place.

When John and Mary arrived at the port of Clemes, the huge statue of Jupiter fell and shattered to pieces with a thunderous noise. At the same time, the ground shook and idols and pagan statues in the temple and in all the shrines fell prostrate and broke in pieces. During the chaos of this collapse, a voice was heard saying, "Men of Apollo, all of you, go to Clemes

Harbor and welcome Mary, the mother of the Great God Jesus". Thus the demons inhabiting the idols were forced against their will to proclaim the truth.

Seeing the destruction around them, all the inhabitants of Athos hurried to Clemes Harbor to meet the Virgin Mary. They received her, the Apostle John and the others with great honor and brought them to a large meeting hall. There they asked her to explain who was the God that she bore and they inquired diligently into the mystery of the Incarnation. They also wondered at how Mary, a Hebrew woman, could explain everything to them in Greek. This was due to the gift of languages that Mary received along with the 120 at Pentecost (Acts 1:14, 2:1-3).

All this resulted in the entire group of the residents of Athos accepting the Christian Faith. They were all then catechized and baptized into the Faith. During their stay on Athos, Mary and the Apostle John performed many miracles among the new converts. Before leaving, they appointed a leader and teacher for the newly illumined residents of Athos from among their traveling party. In addition, Mary prayed for the blessing of Athos, that the Lord would have mercy on it and keep it free from harm until the end of the world along with its inhabitants.

Having blessed Athos, Mary, John and the others set sail for Cyprus. Meanwhile, Lazarus had grown very concerned about Mary's delay, assuming it was because of a storm, and not knowing that all was well. When the ship arrived, there was great rejoicing and thanksgiving. Mary presented Bishop Lazarus with an ornophorion and spimanikia (part of a bishop's vestments) that she had made. And John and Mary shared the good news of all that happened on Athos.

After staying on Cyprus for a short time, Mary blessed the Christians there and returned to Jerusalem with John and the others.

Shortly after Mary and John returned from Cyprus, Mary Magdalene also returned to Jerusalem from her evangelism in Rome and elsewhere. Since she had been very close to the Virgin Mary during Jesus' three-year ministry, she stayed with the Apostle John for several years until the Virgin Mary's death. At this time, the Virgin Mary was in her early 70's and Mary Magdalene was in her late 60's.

The Missionary Journeys of John

After Pentecost, John was at first downcast when he drew the lot of Asia Minor as his mission field due to the danger that lay before him. He repented of this sin of doubt, however, when he remembered the words of the Lord, "There shall not a hair of your head perish" (Luke 21:17-18). After the Virgin Mary died (in the mid-50's AD), John moved to Ephesus permanently. We can see this from Revelation 2 and 3, where John addressed seven churches in Asia: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. These seven churches John knew quite well and he helped to establish them in the 60's and 70's AD, prior to his exile on Patmos. All these Churches are within a 70-mile radius in what is now Western Turkey.

An illustration of John's work in this area can be seen from an account from tradition of events in Hierapolis of Phrygia, a few miles from Laodicea. John worked for a short time there with Nathanael, Philip and Philip's sister Mariamne. There they killed a huge snake-god by their prayers. Following this, John moved on leaving Nathanael, Philip and Mariamne to evangelize the city.

In the late 60's AD, John returned to Jerusalem where Prochorus who had been bishop of Nicomedia joined him. Together, they left for Joppa and stayed three days with Tabitha; then left by ship for Ephesus. They were shipwrecked and all hands were cast ashore at Seleucia except John. Prochorus was arrested under suspicion of sorcery since John didn't come ashore. (They thought John made off with the ship's cargo). Finally, he was released and made his way overland to Mareotis (upon John's prior instruction), walking for 40 days toward Ephesus. Upon Prochorus' arrival, a great wave washed John ashore. After embracing and talking about their experiences, they headed for Ephesus. This was the beginning of a long series of experiences that Jesus had predicted for John, where John would "drink the cup that He drank" (Mark 10:35-39).

In Ephesus they stayed near the house of Dioscorides, the city chief, and went to work for a woman named Romana who ran a bathhouse. John worked at stoking the fire; Prochorus worked at fetching water. After four days, she came by and saw John standing around trying to figure out what to do. She punched him in the face, knocking him to the ground, and called him a lazy, good-for-nothing. [She was a stout woman who used to serve in the army.] John remembered how Jesus was struck, spat upon, lashed, etc. And he told Prochorus that this was an encouragement for them to always bear good will. This happened repeatedly as John began learning the trade. He never gave a word of back talk and Romana thought he was an uneducated peasant. She then had forged legal papers drawn up saying that John and Prochorus were her slaves.

Three months later, Domnus, the 18-year-old son of Dioscorides (who owned the bathhouse) came in and was strangled by a demon that dwelt there. (Prochorus and Domnus' servants watched helplessly.) Romana was in profound grief over how to explain this to her boss. She prayed to Artemis (or Diana) and pulled out her hair and tore her clothes.

John paused in his work to come ask what happened. Before Prochorus could explain, Romana grabbed John, accused him of being a warlock, punched him in the face and demanded he raise Domnus from the dead. John stayed calm, withdrew to pray, then raised Domnus and

brought him to Romana. Romana was so ashamed of how she had treated John she couldn't even look him in the face but cried bitterly at his feet. John then explained whom he was and forgave her and she believed.

Meanwhile, Dioscorides had died of a heart attack on learning that his only son was dead. John, Prochorus, Romana and a crowd of others went there and John raised him also. Dioscorides, Domnus and Romana were then baptized.

Later at a festival of Artemis (Diana), John stood on the high place near the statue of Artemis in his sooty work clothes. This angered the crowd and they hurled a number of stones at John; all these missed John and hit the statue. The "son of thunder" then spoke to them of their delusion and challenged them to have their broken statue punish him. They threw more stones, which only turned back and hit the ones throwing them.

John prayed that the Lord would show these people who's Lord. An earthquake and sudden heat wave struck and 200 people died; the rest begged John for mercy. John prayed again, raised up the 200 and they all believed, were catechized and baptized.

Following this, John performed many other signs similar to those he and Peter did back in Jerusalem in the early 30's AD. The demon that dwelt in the temple of Artemis, however, began to fear that John would cast him out and destroy the temple. So the demon assumed the appearance of a magistrate and persuaded some citizens that he was escorting two sorcerers, John and Prochorus, to prison when they escaped. He offered a large bounty for their capture, dead or alive.

At first, Romana and Dioscorides rescued John and Prochorus. But then the demon aroused a whole mob against them while they were in Dioscorides' house. John voluntarily surrendered to the mob and they took him to the temple of Artemis. By his prayers, the "son of thunder" caused the statue of Artemis to topple and the temple to collapse. John then forced the demon to confess to his plot and directed him to leave the area. "Numberless crowds came to believe and disdained the worship of idols."

However, certain Jews brought news of this to Emperor Domitian in about 81 AD. Domitian began a great prosecution of Christians and had John arrested. After many beatings, John was forced to drink a cup of strong poison, then was boiled in oil. Neither had any effect. Domitian thought John was immortal and had him exiled to the island of Patmos, a penal colony.

On the way to Patmos, one of the sailors fell overboard, drowned and was lost at sea. Everyone on board was grief-stricken except John. John asked each sailor in turn which deity they worshipped. After inquiring of everyone on the ship, John exclaimed how many gods, yet none could save one drowned man. John prayed and a large wave broke over the ship depositing the drowned man alive on the deck.

Later on in the voyage, a storm arose and the ship was in danger of breaking up. The crew asked John to pray again, which he did and calmed the sea. Still later, when they ran out of water, John turned seawater into fresh water. Near the end of the voyage, John healed one of the sailors of dysentery. At this, the entire crew wanted to become John's disciples and go

wherever he wanted. John replied that this was not proper; they still needed to take him to Patmos lest the emperor punish them. When they arrived on Patmos, John catechized and baptized the entire crew.

John first stayed in the home of Myron the governor's father-in-law. After John cast a demon out of Myron's eldest son, the entire family believed. The governor, Lawrence, sent his wife and son to be baptized also. The wife wished to remain celibate in her father's house, but John would not agree to this. John sent her back to her husband saying that he too would come to believe soon. This happened two years later when his term of office expired.

Many of people in the city came to Myron's home to be catechized, healed and baptized by John. Those who were rich wanted to offer John large amounts of money. John instructed them to give it to the poor with their own hand in order that they might have treasure in heaven.

Three years after arriving on Patmos, John and Prochorus were in the market place near the temple of Apollo. Some of the priests of Apollo began to sneer at John and ridicule what he taught. The "son of thunder" prayed, and the temple of Apollo collapsed. The priests immediately grabbed John and inflicted many stripes on him; then they had him thrown into the deepest dungeon. When Myron and his family heard, they got John out -- since they were very influential.

A magician named Coenops, a master of illusion, lived in the wilderness of Patmos. The priests of Apollo went to him to get him to take revenge on John and kill him. This began a battle between the "son of thunder" and the son of perdition. First Coenops sent demons three times to kill John; but John sent them to torment in the abyss. Finally Coenops was so mad he came to the city to challenge John face to face with his illusions.

Several times, Coenops appeared to raise the dead relatives of grieving bystanders by having demons take the form of the loved ones. Coenops challenged John to do the same, but John calmly and humbly said that the Lord did not send him to do that but to teach deluded people. Then John said that Coenops' signs would soon come to nothing. Hearing this, the people jumped on John and beat him until they thought he was dead.

The next day, Coenops returned with his demons in the form of the "resurrected" loved ones and announced to John how he planned to disgrace and shame John further. At the shore of the Aegean, Coenops clapped his hands together and plunged into the sea out of sight, saying he would return in glory. Then the "son of thunder" prayed that the same fate might befall Coenops as befell Pharaoh. At this, there was a peal of thunder and a "boiling" or stirring of the waters where Coenops went under; then nothing. The people waited for three days for Coenops to return -- all to no avail. As for the demons that served Coenops, John ordered them to depart from the island.

Sometime later, a Jew named Philo met John in the market place and debated John on the Scriptures for two days. As John was debating, a young man brought a sick man for John to heal, which John did. Philo replied, "Teacher, what is love?" John responded, "God is love and he who has love has God." Philo replied, "Therefore show the love of God and come home with me." John did so and healed Philo's wife of leprosy while he stayed there. Philo and his wife believed and were baptized.

After John left Philo's house, he came across two of the priests of Apollo who had urged Coenops against John. One priest asked John to heal his lame son that he too may believe. John said, "First believe, then God will heal your son." The priest replied, "First heal my son, then I'll believe." The "son of thunder" raised his voice, "Do not tempt God that your lack of faith become blasphemy. In the Name of Jesus Christ, you shall have your son's crippled feet." Then, John sent the other priest with Prochorus to the first priest's house to bring back the son. When Prochorus got there the child was healed. When the crippled priest saw his son, he cried out with tears in a loud voice, "Have mercy on me, disciple of the Compassionate God." John then healed him and baptized his entire household.

All this happened in the city of Flora on Patmos. After three years, John and Prochorus went to Myrimousa where they observed a young man in chains about to be sacrificed to a wolf-god, that was actually a demon. John commanded the demon to depart; bystanders were very amazed and listened intently as John taught them.

The priests of Zeus, who worshipped the wolf-god, were angry with John. One day, one of the priests' sons was strangled in a bathhouse by the same demon that John had cast out of Romana's bathhouse six years earlier. The priest confessed to John that he, too, had come to believe and asked if John would raise his son. John did so, then cast out the demon and baptized the priest, his son and many others.

After this John and Prochorus left for the suburb of Phlogeon where John cast a demon out of a widow's only son, then catechized and baptized them. On the fourth day they were there, John stood near the temple of Dionysus (Bacchus) as the pagans were starting an orgy. To keep John from hindering the festival, the priests bound John, took him away and beat him until he was half-dead. John prayed that He would do to this temple as He did to the Philistines' temple by Samson. The temple then collapsed, crushing the twelve priests inside who were preparing the orgy.

A renowned sorcerer, Noetian, was furious at John for leveling the temple of Dionysus. He conjured up twelve demons to pose as the resurrected twelve priests, pretending that he had raised them. Knowing Noetian's intent, John sent Prochorus around the other side of the collapsed temple before Noetian could introduce the demons and had Prochorus send the demons to a waterless place. When Noetian tried to "raise" the 12 priests, nothing happened and he was embarrassed. The townsfolk would have killed him if John hadn't prevented them.

The next day, as John was baptizing 220 people, Noetian turned the water John was using as a baptismal font into blood. John turned it back and also struck Noetian with blindness. At this, Noetian begged John's mercy, repented, and was baptized also along with his household.

After this, John and Prochorus went to the city of Karo, three miles distant. One young man in the crowd, Sosipater, who was listening to John, wanted to follow Christ, but was being hounded by his mother into incest with her. He invited John to his house to help him resist his mother. The mother, in turn, denounced John and her son to the governor and the governor ordered John and Sosipater sown into leather bags full of poisonous snakes. Before they could do so, John caused the right hands of the governor and the mother to wither.

The judge, who was secretly a Christian, then confessed his faith and begged John's forgiveness. John restored the judge's and the mother's hands and the judge invited John, Prochorus and Sosipater to his house for two days. During this time, the judge and his family were catechized and baptized. Meanwhile, the mother had come to profound repentance. When John and Sosipater came to her house, they found her weeping bitterly. John comforted her, then catechized and baptized her and her son. She lived the rest of her life in fasting and prayer and in distributing her wealth to the poor.

Toward the end of John's exile on Patmos, he wrote the book of Revelation by dictating it to Prochorus who then copied it onto good parchment.

In about 96 AD, Emperor Domitian was assassinated and his successor, Nerva, did not persecute the Christians. John was free to return to Ephesus. By then, nearly all the inhabitants of Patmos had come to believe, and they wanted John to stay. When he told them that the Lord had instructed him to return to Ephesus, they asked him to draft a written document that they could use to remain steadfast in the faith. This John did later by dictating his Gospel to Prochorus who had Sosipater copy it onto good parchment. After bidding farewell (with many tears) to the residents of Patmos where John had spent 15 years, John and Prochorus sailed to Ephesus where they were received with great joy and stayed in the house of Domnus [Dioscorides had died during John's absence.]

John spent the rest of his life in Ephesus in strict fasting and prayer, living as a Nazarite. Because of his age, he didn't have the strength to preach anymore but taught just the bishops privately. Jerome stated that the faithful carried him to Church where he would say over and over "Little children, love one another." When his disciples asked him why he just said this, he replied, "This is the Lord's commandment; and if you keep it, it is enough."

John died in the third year of Trajan (about 101 AD) at the age of nearly 100. Most accounts state that John instructed seven of his disciples to go outside the city with him and dig his grave. John then climbed in and died as he lay in the grave. The seven then buried him. Later the faithful dug up the grave to give John a more prominent resting-place, but the grave was empty.

The Beloved Apostle

September 26, 2009

GOSPEL LESSON: John 19:25-27, 21:24-25

John As The Beloved Apostle

The Gospel reading for Matins expands on the above Reading to include John 21:15-25. Today's Gospel Reading begins at the foot of the Cross, where the Virgin Mary, Mary the wife of Clopas, Mary Magdalene, and John were gathered. Clopas (or Cleopas) was the brother of Joseph, the betrothed of the Virgin Mary, and his wife was the Virgin Mary's sister-in-law. All of the Twelve Apostles, besides John, had scattered and were in hiding (John 20:19) as was predicted by the Scriptures (Matthew 26:31, Zechariah 13:7). Judas Iscariot had already hanged himself (Matthew 27:3-10).

As Jesus was dying on the Cross, He committed the care of His mother to the Apostle John. This was a tremendous honor for John and this indicates John's closeness to the Lord and how he was "beloved". Under the provisions of the Mosaic Law, the oldest son in the family had the "birthright" and was expected to care for his mother for the rest of her life in the event of his father's death. However, the Virgin Mary had no other natural children, and it was her only Son that was dying. John was very close to the Virgin Mary and John was also the only one with the courage to be present and identified with Jesus at the Cross. As we'll see from the Epistle lesson, John also had a considerable measure of the love of God.

John Chrysostom commented, "John concealed himself in modesty as he wrote his Gospel. Had John desired to boast, he would have also put in the cause for which Jesus loved him, since probably it was some great and wonderful one. But why did Jesus converse on nothing else with John, not even comforting him? Because it was no time for comforting by words; besides, it was no little thing for him to be honored with such honor and to receive the reward of steadfastness. For since it was likely that, being His mother, she would grieve and require protection, He with reason entrusted her to the beloved disciple. This He did, knitting them together in love. John understood this and took her to his own home" (Homily Lxxxv on John 19).

A similar circumstance occurred at the Last Supper. At one point during the Last Supper, Jesus was troubled in Spirit and testified and said, "Most assuredly, I say to you, one of you will betray Me" (John 13:21). The disciples were perplexed about whom He spoke, and looked at one another. John, however, was leaning on Jesus' bosom. Peter motioned for John to ask Jesus who it was of whom He spoke. John then leaned back on Jesus' breast and asked, "Lord, who is it?" (John 13:22-25).

John Chrysostom stated, "It is a question worth asking why, when all were distressed and trembling, when their Leader was troubled, John like one at ease leans on Jesus' bosom, and not only leans, but even lies on His breast? Nor is this the only thing worthy of enquiry, but also that which follows. John referred to himself in his Gospel as 'the disciple whom Jesus loved'. Why did no one else say this of himself? The others were loved too, but John was loved more

than any of them. John would not have mentioned it either unless he had come to this passage in his Gospel history. For if after telling us that Peter beckoned to John to ask, he had added nothing more, he would have caused considerable doubt and would have compelled us to inquire into the reason. In order to solve this difficulty, he said that he lay on the bosom of Jesus. Do you think that you have learned a little thing when you have heard that ‘he lay’, and that their Master allowed such boldness to them? If you desire to know the cause of this, the action was of love. This does not imply that John was greater than Peter; the thing took place because of the great love that Jesus bore toward John. Observe too John’s modesty; he didn’t mention his own name, but only ‘the disciple whom Jesus loved’ (Ibid.).

Peter’s Love for John

The Gospel lesson contains another interchange between John, Peter and Jesus. This time, the Lord had just indicated to Peter by what death he would glorify God. Peter then turned around and, pointing to John asked, “But Lord, what about this man?” Jesus replied, “If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you? You follow Me” (John 21:18-22). This time Peter asked the question while John was silent.

John Chrysostom wrote that this indicated Peter’s love for John as well as the Lord’s love for John. “When therefore Christ had foretold great things to Peter, committed the world to him, spoke beforehand of his martyrdom, and testified that his love was greater than that of the others, desiring to have John also share with him, he said, ‘But Lord, what about this man?’ In other words, shall he (i.e. John) not come the same way with us? As at that other time not being able himself to ask, he put John forward; so here desiring to make John a return and supposing that he would desire to ask about the matters pertaining to himself, but had not courage, he himself undertook the questioning. Jesus spoke from strong affection, but also by His words taught us not to be impatient, or curious beyond what seems good to Him. For because Peter was ever hot and springing forward to inquiries such as this, to cut short his warmth and to teach him not to inquire farther, He said this (Ibid.).

Just prior to this, the Lord had asked Peter three times whether he loved Him. Each time that Peter responded in the affirmative, the Lord replied, “Feed My lambs”, “Tend My sheep”, and Feed My sheep”. Chrysostom summarized this by saying, “There are indeed many other things which are able to give us boldness towards God and to show us bright and approved. But that which most of all brings good will from on high is tender care for our neighbor” (Homily Lxxxviii on John 21). The Lord had summarized this in a similar fashion earlier with the Greatest Commandment, which was part of a Creed used in the 1st Century synagogue worship. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-40). For more details of the Lord’s teaching on the Greatest Commandment, see the Gospel lesson for the 15th Sunday after Pentecost.

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One might ask why the Lord singled Peter out to ask him this and not John or one of the others. Chrysostom stated that Peter was the “mouth of the disciples, the leader of the band”; that is, as the first among equals. Paraphrasing the situation, Chrysostom wrote, “If you love Me, preside over your brethren. And the warm love which you always showed and in which you rejoiced, show now. And the life which you said you would lay down for Me, now give for My sheep” (Ibid.).

Peter was grieved that the Lord asked him this question a third time (John 21:17). He remembered how he denied he even knew Jesus three times in the courtyard of the high priest (John 18:13-27). He knew that he was forgiven, and it was painful for him to even remember his sin. But the Lord had a larger purpose here. Earlier Peter had overstated his love, saying that he would never stumble because of his Lord. He even proclaimed that he would die with his Lord before he ever denied Him (Matthew 26:33-35). Chrysostom stated, “For on this account Peter was troubled, ‘lest perchance I think I love and don’t, as before when I thought and affirmed much, yet I was convicted at last’. But Jesus asked him the third time to show at what price He sets the care of His own sheep, and that this especially is a sign of love towards Him. The Lord did not say this to Peter as distrusting him, but as greatly trusting him. The Lord wished besides to point out a proof of love towards Him and to instruct us in what manner especially we ought to love Him” (Ibid.).

Peter and John continued to be very close after this for the next two decades. After Pentecost, we see them together going up to the Temple for 9th Hour Prayer, and healing the man who was born lame (Acts 3:1-10). Peter and John together were bold in testifying before the family of the high priest and the Sadducees (Acts 4:5-13, 5:17). After the Apostles were arrested, the boldness of Peter and John encouraged the other Apostles to be bold also (Acts 5:29). When the Samaritans received the Word of God from Deacon Philip, the Apostles at Jerusalem sent Peter and John to them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:5-17).

However, Peter began travelling more frequently, even taking his wife with him (1 Corinthians 9:5). Since John had been assigned to the care of the Virgin Mary, he remained behind in Jerusalem more frequently, such as when Peter “went through all parts of the country and came down to the saints who dwelt in Lydda” (Acts 9:32). When Herod (Agrippa) killed James, the brother of John, with the sword in 44 AD and tried to kill Peter also, Peter escaped (Acts 12:1-17) and slowly made his way to Antioch and out of Herod’s jurisdiction (Galatians 2:11). Peter and John were together again briefly for the Council of Jerusalem in 48 AD (Acts 15:1-29). After that, Peter began his four major missionary journeys to Asia Minor, Europe, Africa and Britain (For details, see Appendix A.) and he saw John infrequently during the rest of his life. One time of reunion for all the Apostles was the occasion of the funeral for the Virgin Mary in about 55 AD.

Perfecting the Love of God in Us

September 26, 2009

EPISTLE LESSON: 1 John 4:12-19

Being greatly loved by the Lord, John had a perspective on love that was uncommon in its depth among the people of God. There are several aspects to this that are brought out in the Epistle lesson:

The Source of Love

God is love (1 John 3:8, 4:8, 4:16), meaning that He is the source and embodiment of all love. “We love Him because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19). He did this by sending His Son to be the propitiation for our sins (1 John 4:10), where the plan for the coming of His Son was first announced in the Garden of Eden after the Fall (Genesis 3:15). “In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His Only Begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him (1 John 4:9). Christ is “the Son of the Father in truth and in love” (2 John 1:3). To be godly, one needs to continue in or abide in the love of God. “God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God and God in him” (1 John 4:16). To say that God is love is not to define who God is, but rather it is a description of His relationship to us as our Father. He shows fatherly care to believer and unbeliever alike (Matthew 5:45), but unbelievers don’t acknowledge Him as Father.

There is a theological aspect to the love of God. “Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father either; he who acknowledges the Son has the Father also. Therefore let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father” (1 John 2:23-24). John was fighting a Gnostic heresy most of his life. Two main issues were: 1) Does God the Father have a Son who is of the same substance as His Father (i.e. consubstantial)? 2) Is the man Jesus that person, God the Son? John was teaching that Jesus Christ is one Divine Person having two natures (i.e. God and man). To deny this denies the love of God in the Incarnation in sending His Son.

The Greatest Commandment

“Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves Him who begot (i.e. the Father) also loves him (i.e. us) who is begotten of Him” (1 John 5:1). Since Christ is the Head of the Body (Colossians 1:18), one cannot love the Head without loving the Body. This is what the Greatest Commandment states also. “For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. Not as Cain who was of the wicked one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his works were evil and his brother’s were righteous” (1 John 3:11-12). When Christ was asked which was the Greatest Commandment, He quoted from the Mosaic Law (Deuteronomy 6:5, Leviticus 19:18). “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two Commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:36-40). Yet this Commandment didn’t originate with Moses’ revelation on Mt. Sinai. Adam and Eve knew this in the Garden of Eden from the beginning and Cain was judged for failing to live up to it.

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John reminded people of this ancient Commandment. “And this is His Commandment: that we should believe on the Name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us Commandment” (1 John 3:23). “And this Commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also” (1 John 4:21). “By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His Commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His Commandments. And His Commandments are not burdensome” (1 John 5:2-3). This is not a legalistic code of do this and don’t do that. For the Law of God has been written on His people’s hearts (Hebrews 8:10-13, Jeremiah 31:33). Even unbelievers have at least a portion of God’s Law written on their hearts, where their conscience also bears witness (Romans 2:15).

John continued this theme in his second Epistle directed to “the elect lady and her children” (2 John 1:1). Most people interpret “the elect lady” as one of the Churches that looked to John for guidance. “And now I plead with you, lady, not as though I wrote a new commandment to you, but that which we have had from the beginning: that we love one another. This is love that we walk according to His Commandments. This is the Commandment, that as you have heard from the beginning, you should walk in it” (2 John 1:5-6).

Love for one’s brother in keeping with the Greatest Commandment meant a lot in the 1st Century. “By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren” (1 John 3:16). After all, Christ instructed us to love others as He had loved us. “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another. As I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35). This “new commandment” is “new” in the sense that the quality of our love is measured against that of Christ Himself, and is to be a sacrificial love as His was. “Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself” (Philippians 2:3). The way this works out was described by the Lord as feeding, welcoming, visiting, and clothing the least of these My brethren. To refuse to do so to the least of the members of the Body of Christ is to refuse to do so to the Lord Himself (Matthew 25:37-40). John stated it like this: “But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?” (1 John 3:17).

False Love, the Love of this World

In contrast to love of God and love of neighbor, John stated, “He who does not love does not know God, for God is love” (1 John 4:8). “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar. For he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?” (1 John 4:20). “My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:18). The Venerable Bede put it this way: “Even though he may think he is enlightened by the Lord, anyone who comes to the font of life hating his brother is still in darkness. It is there that he is to be reborn; it is the cup of that precious blood whereby he is to be redeemed. He cannot in any way have put off the darkness of his sins when he did not take care to put on the fundamentals of love.”

John’s uncle was James, the Lord’s brother and Bishop of Jerusalem from 30 to 62 AD. Living in Jerusalem until c. 55 AD, John was very much influenced by his uncle. If we take the word “love” in John’s writings and substitute the word “faith”, John sounds very much like his uncle. “You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only. For as the body without the Spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead” (James 2:24, 26).

The love of God creates a stark contrast between those who love God and those who don't. "In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother" (1 John 3:10). "Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him" (1 John 3:1). "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (1 John 2:15).

In John's 3rd Epistle, he wrote to "the beloved Gaius" who embodied the love of God both toward the brethren and toward strangers.

Perfecting the Love of God in Us

The love of God as seen in His Church is not a static situation, but is always changing. We can either grow toward being perfected in Christ or we can grow cold. An example of growing cold can be seen from John's vision while he was in exile on Patmos (Revelation 1:9). He wrote to the Church in Ephesus that they had left their first love (Revelation 2:4). In other words, they had grown cold in their love toward God and their brethren. In contrast to this, John wrote in his Epistle that we can and should be perfected in love. This begins with faith: "And we have known and believed the love that God has for us" (1 John 4:16).

For love to be perfected, we need a continuing vision of Christ. "No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us" (1 John 4:12). Love for one another is the result or the evidence of the continuing vision of Christ. Keeping His Commandments is one of the prerequisites for achieving that result. "Whoever keeps His Word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him" (1 John 2:5). Keeping His Commandments does not imply only a mere lip service to the Ten Commandments, although the Ten Commandments are a good place to start in our culture. Keeping His Commandments rather implies living by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4, Deuteronomy 8:3). Our bodies are a Temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19-20), and we have the Law written on our hearts (Jeremiah 31:33, 2 Corinthians 3:3). Therefore we do not need to make great efforts to go somewhere or do something to find out what God would have us do at any moment (Deuteronomy 30:11-15).

Keeping His Commandments is part of a process of striving for righteousness. It is like faith versus works (James 2:24-26). Without both, one has neither. Without striving for righteousness, one does not have the love of God, and vice versa. "If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:6-9). We all sin (Romans 3:23); therefore we all need to confess our sins as part of our striving for righteousness. A study of the lives of the saints is helpful for us in that we see examples of people who struggled in their striving for righteousness, and who exhibited the love of God as a result.

In our striving for righteousness, it is also helpful to see where the battlefield is. It is our own desires that we need to fight. "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God.'

For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin. And sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death” (James 1:13-15). For it is the things that come from our own hearts that really defile us (Matthew 15:18-20). Thus the striving forces us to concentrate on the plank in our own eyes, rather than looking for specks in the eyes of others (Matthew 7:3). A good treatise on this striving was written by John Cassian (4th Century). He wrote his treatise for the benefit of the monks of his day, but his insight is very apropos for our day also. For details, see John Cassian, “On the Eight Vices”, The Philokalia, Faber and Faber Ltd., 1983.

Fear is not part of this love because fear does not involve faith. “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love” (1 John 4:18). “Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the Day of Judgment. Because as He is, so are we in this world” (1 John 4:17). “God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and love and of a sound mind” (2 Timothy 1:7). We have been delivered to serve Him without fear (Luke 1:74), for it is the Father’s good pleasure to give us the Kingdom (Luke 12:32). To return to fear again would be to receive the spirit of bondage (Romans 8:15, Hebrews 2:15).

During our striving for righteousness, however, we do have the fear of God. “Let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Corinthians 7:1). Mired in our sins, we fear coming short of entering His rest (Hebrews 4:1). Thus we work out our own salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12), and we submit to one another in the fear of God (Ephesians 5:21). Sometimes it is necessary for sinners to be rebuked publicly in order that the rest may fear and not be carried away with the sins of a few (1 Timothy 5:20). Fear is part of the struggle, but fear is done away with when love is perfected. Even Christ was described as having a godly fear in learning obedience by the things which He suffered. Even Christ was described as having been perfected (Hebrews 5:7-9); i.e. perfected in His flesh, for He was always perfect in His Deity.

We are encouraged to have a simple, childlike faith where we are not concerned about worldly matters such as food, clothing and shelter (Matthew 6:25-34). This way, we will be free to concentrate on love. If our love were perfected, we would not fear those who may kill the body, because we know that they cannot kill the soul (Matthew 10:28). This is a striving that takes some effort, but it is not impossible. For the Lord said, “Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in Heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). In this way we are to be imitators of God (Ephesians 5:1).

The wisdom of God in this is also a mystery. Paul wrote about “the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints. To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:26-27). Because of the continuing vision of Christ that Paul had, he labored, “striving according to His working which worked in him mightily”. His goal was to teach “every man in all wisdom, that he may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus” (Colossians 1:28-29), that they “may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God” (Colossians 4:12).

John's Epistles may seem at first glance like they were written by a simpleton and not by a theologian. But the converse is the case. All of John's writings have profound insight into the love of God that was bestowed on him in an uncommon way.

Diadochos of Photiki (5th Century) commented on this: "Obedience is the chief among the initiatory virtues; for first it displaces presumption and then it engenders humility within us. Thus it becomes for those who are willing to embrace it, a door leading to the love of God" (On Spiritual Knowledge, Text 41).