

167 Good-bye to "a son of thunder"

Of the original twelve disciples chosen by the Lord for His inner circle, Judas Iscariot took his own life, and no fewer than ten of his colleagues were later martyred for the Faith. They knew that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah; they knew that He was crucified, dead and buried; they knew that He had been raised from the dead; and they knew that He has ascended to heaven, with the promise of His future return in victory and glory. From this certain knowledge they possessed, in their heads and hearts, nothing would silence them, nothing would make them deny what they knew, even at the cost of dreadful martyrdom. Such martyrdom is in itself a massive testimony to the truth of the Gospel records we possess, and can be used when appropriate in our witnessing for the Faith, just as our forebears did.

This leaves just one more disciple, the twelfth, John. We gather from early Christian tradition that John became based in Ephesus, where, not surprisingly, he was a much revered Christian leader. He lived to the end of the first century AD, and died peacefully in his own bed.

John came from a well-to-do family in Galilee, where his father Zebedee ran a fishing business with several employees (eg Mark 1.20). His mother is likely to be Salome (inferred in eg., Mark 16.1 and Matthew 27.56), the sister of Mary, the Lord's mother, meaning that Jesus and John were first cousins. This kinship explains the particular closeness of Jesus and John, "the disciple whom Jesus loved", and the disciple to whom Jesus entrusted His mother from the cross (John 19.26-27). We also learn (eg., Mark 15.40-41) that Salome was one of the women "who had followed him and ministered to him when he had been in Galilee"; and she was one of the group going to the tomb on the morning of the resurrection (Mark 16.1). This fine lady, like the rest of us, also had her faults, including a certain pushiness regarding her sons! (Matthew 20.20).

John is a real work of grace in himself. We could easily assume, from what he became, that he was gifted with unusual spiritual insight from the earliest days, but that is far from the case, for the Lord nicknamed John and his brother James as "the sons of thunder"! (Mark 3.17). These brothers, from their comfortable background, were at times hot-headed, selfish and ambitious (eg., Luke 9.49,54 / Matthew 20.20-24) - another reminder that for His inner band of disciples Jesus was not after a bunch of soppy "yes-men"!

Yet the Lord was steadily at work in this young man's life. John was privileged, with James his brother and Simon Peter - just a three-some within the Twelve - to be present at the raising of Jairus' daughter (Mark 5.37), at the transfiguration

(Mark 9.2), and in Gethsemane (Mark 14.33). After the women returned from the empty tomb on that wonderful morning, it was John who, overtaking Peter, reached the empty tomb by himself; he looked in, but lingered outside. Peter arrived and immediately entered; and then we read that "that other disciple" - John himself - "went in also ... and he saw, and believed" (John 20.1-8).

No longer is he "a son of thunder" - those days and that character have gone. Having been in the presence of Christ, he is now something far more precious, and far more useful in the Lord's service. John was later chosen and inspired by the Holy Spirit to be the human author of the fourth Gospel, of the three epistles bearing his name, and of the last book of God's Word, Revelation.

Jerome tells us that when the elderly John was carried into the Christian meetings at Ephesus, he used to say over and over again, "Little children, love one another". "Yes, yes, you've already told us that Sir" came the response; to which dear John replied, "Then do it".

As his long and wonderful life drew to its earthly close, John simply gave just this one message, all the time, to anyone who would listen - "Love one another". In this our day, of such confusion and division, His Holy Spirit-inspired words are as simple, crucial and beautiful as ever.

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