

The Disciple whom Jesus Loved

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Many of the simplest phrases in St John's gospel have an arresting character and may powerfully urge us to turn them over and over in mind. 'The disciple whom Jesus loved' (Jn 21. 20) is one such which calls for further thought, and which may well help us to pray. This disciple is first explicitly referred to at the last supper

'Now one of the disciples, he whom Jesus loved, was reclining at Jesus' breast. Simon Peter therefore beckoned to him and said to him, who is it of whom he speaks? He then, leaning back upon the breast of Jesus, said to him, Lord, who is it? Jesus answered, It is he for whom I shall dip the morsel and give it to him'. (Jn 13. 23-26). This incident is re-echoed in the supplementary and probably redactional chapter 21, and still we are given no name

'Peter turning round saw that disciple whom Jesus loved following—the one who had leaned upon his breast at the supper and asked, Lord who is the one who will betray you?' (Jn 21. 20).

We read again about this same disciple at the foot of the cross. Jesus therefore, seeing his mother and the disciple whom he loved, standing by, said to his mother, Woman, behold your son'. (Jn 19. 26).

And the first resurrection narrative speaks about this disciple, once again without a name

'On the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early in the morning, while it was yet dusk, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. Accordingly she came running to Simon Peter and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved'. (20. 1).

All commentators point out here, quite rightly, that in the Greek a different word for love is used,¹ yet the meaning would appear to be the same.

The last mention of the beloved disciple is when the lowly folk of Galilee find themselves once again in a group by their boats

'There were together Simon Peter, Thomas called "the twin", Nathanael from Cana of Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two more

¹*hon ephilei ho Jesus*, instead of the usual *egapa*. Note however that the Syriac version makes no difference, nor indeed does Delitzsch's Hebrew rendering. It is not easy to see how any underlying Aramaic would distinguish the words.

of his disciples'. (Jn 21. 2).

Four of these are without a name, and one of these four is called 'that disciple whom Jesus loved, and who said to Peter, It is the Lord', (Jn 21. 7) after they had gathered in a miraculous draught of fish. From all these texts we can form a clear idea of this disciple loved by Jesus. He was one of the twelve, and one of the inner grouping, an intimate and favourite of our Lord, one granted special insight into the ways of God, and one granted a special role in respect of our Saviour's mother. Over and above all this he was privileged to be loved by our Lord superlatively. As to his name, the text is consistently silent. Catholic tradition tells us that the beloved disciple was St John.

We have noted the repeated emphasis of the gospel about this disciple whom Jesus loved. Where else, we may be prompted to ask, do we read of our Lord loving someone specially or of someone being specially loved? Two passages come to mind. First that of the rich young man who would keep the commandments but failed to part with his wealth. We are told that our Lord 'gazed upon him and loved him' (Mk 10. 21). Secondly we have, in the story of the raising of Lazarus, the exclamation of his sisters 'Lord he whom you love is sick' (Jn 11. 3), and then we are told that our Lord 'loved Martha and her sister Mary and Lazarus'. The household at Bethany was very dear to our Lord, and loved by him.² It is not enough to translate, as does Fr Spencer, 'Jesus had a deep friendship for Martha and her sister Mary and for Lazarus'. This reference to the love of our Lord for Lazarus has set a contemporary scholar on a line of argument which identifies the beloved disciple with Lazarus.³ Alongside these definite expressions of our Lord's love for particular individuals, we ought perhaps to place those passages when he shows admiration and wonder, as in Jn 1. 47 'See: a genuine Israelite in whom there is no guile', or when he claimed that he had not found so great faith in Israel (Matt. 8. 10; Lk. 7. 9) as in that centurion whose son he healed. Surely our Lord's admiration and wonder in such instances was a loving admiration. And then we must set this particular love of individuals against the general background of his love for all the children of God, for 'he first loved us' (1 Jn 4. 10) and

²That he who was innocence itself should love intensely, and love some more than others while loving all men, are all truths which need to be thought about, and prayed and preached - the more so when the word 'love' is too often debased in popular parlance, and unthinking egalitarianism creeps into domains where it has no place.

³J. N. Sanders, *Who was this disciple whom Jesus loved?* in *Studies in the fourth gospel*, Mowbrays, 1957, pp. 72-82.

'with a very great love he has loved us' (Ephes. 2. 4), and 'having loved his own in the world, he loved them to the end'. (Jn 13. 1).

The anonymity of this disciple loved by Jesus is, as we have seen, so striking and so insistent that we are forced to conclude that it was deliberately maintained by the author of the gospel as we now have it, as if he were purposely hiding himself or minimising his prominent part at essential moments in our Lord's earthly life. Other passages in the gospel speak of some more people without a name. Could they too be the disciple loved by our Lord? Many have thought so, but we need to look at the texts more closely. In Jn 1. 35-40 we read that two disciples of the Baptist started to follow our Lord. One was Andrew. Who was the other? Let us suppose that St John is meant. We can then understand that he was one who had been at the school of the Baptist, together with Andrew and some others. Hence we can understand the large place given to the Precursor in the fourth gospel, with much particular information only in that gospel⁴ and precisions about the respective roles of Precursor and Messiah: 'He must increase. I must decrease' (Jn 3. 30). We can see too how this gospel plunges its roots into a background of baptist movements and thoroughly judaic milieux, with some affinities (no more) to that world of thought and prayer unearthed at Qumrân.

Rather different is the force of Jn 18. 15 'Simon Peter was following Jesus, and so was another disciple, who was known to the high-priest, so he entered the courtyard with Jesus'. There is no difficulty in that a Galilaean fisherman was known to the high-priest and could approach him. In near-eastern and semitic worlds it is much easier for the lowest in the land to approach and talk to the highest, in a way not conceivable to our western society. The real difficulty is to see how one of the twelve could approach the high-priests' entourage at this point in the gospel story, when Jewish hostility was exacerbated. So the 'other disciple' of 18. 15 may be one of the leading people who believed in our Lord but not openly, the crypto-Christians of the time (cf. Jn 12. 42); if this is so we can suggest Nicodemus or Joseph of Arimathea who came to the fore at our Lord's burial. There is no need in this instance to suppose, as many do, that 'the other disciple' was the disciple loved by Jesus.

Another conclusion forced on us is that the disciple loved by Jesus is author of the gospel which bears his name. There is an argument drawn from Jn 21. 20, 24 to this effect. True, the gospel does not mention its

⁴cf. Jn 1. 8, 15, 20; 3. 27-30. Jn 1. 19-28; 32-34. Jn 3. 22-26; 4. 3.

author by name, but it provides indirect information about him, and indeed quite fully, if we think of the texts at the head of this article. He was one of the twelve (from the synoptic gospels we learn that only twelve were at the last supper). The title which he gives himself, and his relations with St Peter (in the texts we have selected, above) whose primacy he recognizes (Jn 21. 15), lead us to think that he was one of the privileged circle of apostles, 'the three' who were close-linked together, as we learn from the synoptic gospels (cf. Mk 5. 37; 9. 2; 14. 33). From what we have said, Peter is ruled out as author and so too James, who was martyred in 44 A.D. (Acts 12. 2). Remains then John, the other son of Zebedee, the object of a mysterious prophecy of our Lord (Jn 21. 20-23) which had been misunderstood and had to be corrected. Acts stresses his close relations with St Peter, while always leaving initiative and primacy of rank to him (cf. Acts 3. 1-11; 4. 13, 19; 8. 15-20). The same relationship between them appears in the fourth gospel.

Another hint of St John's authorship comes from the very silence which hangs over the sons of Zebedee. This is all the more striking as this gospel mentions apostles more often than any of the synoptics.⁵ Silence about the Zebedee family, in the fourth gospel, is the more explicable if St John was one of that family—in fact the beloved disciple, '... who bears witness to these events, and who has written this narrative, and we know that his witness is true'. (Jn 21. 24).

The disciple loved by our Lord, the mysterious follower without a name, and the author of the gospel are all one St John, as Catholic tradition has held from the earliest times. But beside and beyond the historical reality we can discern a symbol. Not that we are faced with a choice between historical reality or symbolism. We accept evidences and the historical reality and see in that same reality a further symbolic force. The disciple loved by our Lord stands for, is a symbol of, all those who are specially loved by him. The disciple whom Jesus loved represents a class of persons. This is borne out by the repetition of and the emphasis laid on the term. Nameless though he be, the disciple stands out in the gospel narratives, as we have seen. Further 'the disciple (*ho mathetes*) whom Jesus loved' seems to represent a hebrew turn of speech as in hebrew the article with a singular noun can often represent a class or genus. An excellent definition of those who constitute this class of persons occurs in Jn 14. 21

'He who holds to my commandments and observes them, he it is

⁵cf. Abbot Chapman, in *J.T.S.* 1929, p. 16.

who loves me. He who so loves me, shall be loved by my Father, and I will love him and reveal myself to him'.

Let us note how the simple word 'holds' (*echein*) here has all the force of cleaving firmly to, or resolutely adhering to. Note also 'observes them': he must translate his belief into practice. Such a person will be loved by God the Father. Not that God's love is as it were compelled by his creature. On the contrary, God has first loved us and God's love is ever causative. St Thomas tells us that 'true love has the characteristic of drawing those who are loved to an intense love of the lover'⁶ and in this connection cites Jeremiah 31. 3, 'I have loved you with an eternal love, and so have had compassion on you and drawn you to me'. God indeed is truest love and source and generator of all the love of those who keep his commandments and are friends of Jesus (Jn 15. 14) and abide in his love just as our Lord has observed his Father's commands and abides in his love (Jn 15. 10). Then further in the very full text of Jn 14. 21, our Lord promises that he will love those who are loved by God, and so they too will be disciples loved by Jesus, who will reveal himself to them—'my Lord and my God'—already in this life, and then perfectly when he leaves this life to meet the kindly and joyous countenance of Christ.⁷

Thus 'the disciple whom Jesus loved' is the disciple *par excellence* and worthy representative and prototype of all others loved by Jesus Christ. All the others who are so supremely loved can be thought of as a wholly spiritual class or grouping privileged with a privilege of love, and constituting the very core of the Church which we believe in.⁸

As the 'disciple loved by Jesus' stands for all who are so loved, we can then see the fittingness of our usual prayer, 'who in the person of thy beloved disciple John didst commend us all to thine own sweet mother . . .' All true lovers of God can be happy at knowing that they are at one with St John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, realising all the while that if anything at all has been achieved in true love, it is because God has first loved them.

⁶*Habet enim hoc verus amor ut amatos ad amantis dilectionem trahat. Super Ev. Joan. Par. 1934.*

⁷*mitis, atque festivus Christi Jesu tibi aspectus appareat, (from the Ordo commendationis animae.)*

⁸St Thomas, *Summa Theologiae* 3a. 8.3.