

## A Homily for Saint John the Evangelist's Day

A few years ago, I was talking to Archbishop Upham and the subject of apostolic succession came up. I wondered about our apostolic lineage and he sent me a document that was based on the records kept in the office of Bishop Albert Chambers, who was chief consecrator of the then Father Morse and three other priests at the Denver consecrations of 1978. It was an astonishing document. As I read, I saw that our APCCK lineage was traced to such well-known bishops as Samuel Seabury (the first American Bishop), William Sancroft (who could not swear loyalty to William and Mary), Thomas Cranmer (father of the Book of Common Prayer), Thomas Becket, St. Augustine of Canterbury, the early Church Fathers Irenaeus of Lyons and St. Polycarp of Smyrna who was consecrated by St. John the Apostle.

That makes all of us Anglicans descendants of Saint John the Apostle. John is the Apostle most admired by Christians. He was the beloved disciple and has been called the Apostle of Love and a paragon of angelic virtue. He was the son of Zebedee and the brother of Andrew. According to tradition, his mother was Salome, the sister of Mary, Jesus' mother. John was part of Jesus' inner circle. He was the only Apostle who was present at the crucifixion where Jesus told him to take his aunt, the Blessed Virgin, as his own mother. It has been pointed out that he was closest to the Lord and understood his teachings the best. Yet it is often forgotten that Jesus called John the Son of Thunder because he could rise up in anger to defend the Church against heresy.

This not-so-gentle side of John can be seen in his first epistle when he says: *He that committeth sin is of the devil; for the devil*

*sinneth from the beginning* (1 St. Jn. 3:8). These words appear very unforgiving but in the Greek, the present tense is used which means that John is saying that the person who habitually sins is of the devil. Harsh words but they leave room for repentance. Then in the next chapter, John says: *If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen* (1 St. Jn. 4:20)? John indeed can thunder loudly but we also hear gentler words of his in every Eucharist: *If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the Propitiation for our sins* (1 St. Jn. ii. 1, 2.). So the obvious conclusion is that John makes it clear that being a half-hearted or insincere Christian is not enough to merit salvation.

Tradition and the Church Fathers tell us much about the work of Saint John's later years. In the sixties under the Emperor Nero, Tertullian and Saint Jerome tell us that John was imprisoned, tortured and almost martyred at Rome, where he was thrown into a cauldron of boiling oil but emerged unscathed. John later escaped and made his way to Ephesus and cared for the churches of Asia Minor for the rest of his life. A generation later, the emperor Domitian banished John to the island of Patmos but in the year ninety-six, the emperor Nerva allowed John to return to Ephesus where he died some years later a very old man.

John's greatest contributions, however, were by his own pen and, since he lived long enough to witness early heresies emerge, his Gospel corrected those heresies and explained details of Jesus' theology much more thoroughly than the Synoptic Gospels. (*In the beginning was the Word; and the Word was with God; and the Word was God.*) Thus, he was called Saint John the Divine which is seventeenth century English for theologian. His three epistles were written about the same time and during his exile on the island of Patmos, he was caught up in an ecstatic vision which was the basis for his Book of Revelation.

There is a wonderful story told by Saint Jerome about Saint John

which conveys the essence of just who Saint John was. When Saint John was an old man and too weak to celebrate the liturgy, he would be carried to the front of the church for the sermon and every Sunday would say: *Little children, love ye one another*. Some thought the old man was “losing it” and challenged him but he replied: It is the commandment of the Lord, *and if this only be done, it is enough*.  
+Donald Ashman