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HOW TO HONOUR SAINT JOHN

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John the Baptist is the great prophet of Christ's Advent – the austere "voice crying the wilderness, prepare ye the way of the Lord". But John the Apostle and Evangelist, in whose honour this church is dedicated, is the great witness to the Incarnation. The one who declared "the Word was made flesh", fittingly has his feast-day on the third day of Christmas, December 27th. (A secondary feast falls on May 6th, "St John at the Latin Gate"– by happy coincidence the eve of this church's consecration in 1853.) How, and for what, do we honour him?

Tradition records that after John eventually settled in the city of Ephesus (in what is now Turkey), where the ruins of a great 6th century basilica built in his honour by the emperor Justinian may be seen. The only apostle not to die a martyr, John nonetheless suffered for his witness to Christ, being exiled, under Domitian, to the isle of Patmos, where he wrote the Revelation (Rev. 1:9). After-ward he returned to Ephesus where he wrote the Gospel and Epistles, and lived to a great age, dying around 100 A. D. In later centuries a picturesque tale was told of his drinking a poisoned cup without harm, and so one of the symbols of St. John is the chalice with a serpent emerging from it. (You can see this image in the glass over the Charlton Street door of the church.) Whatever the historicity of such tales, the imagination that produced them is scriptural, for it is a story about one of the signs promised to the apostles to confirm their witness to Christ: "if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them" (Mark 16:18).

Tradition identifies John as the unnamed "disciple whom Jesus loved" (13:23). The Lord's love for John was the basis for John's special vocation of witness (John 20:31; 21:24; 1 John 1:1-4). As an antiphon for St. John's day puts it, "This is the same John who leaned on the Lord's bosom at the Last Supper, the blessed Apostle, unto whom were revealed the secrets of heaven". Along with Andrew, John came to know Jesus before any other disciple (John 1:35-40). He was there at the beginning when John the Baptist bore witness to Jesus as the "Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (1:29). He was there at the end, when a soldier pierced the side of the dead Jesus, and blood and water flowed forth, though no bone was broken, signs that Jesus was indeed the true Passover Lamb, just as the Baptist had foretold (19:31-37). At the Last Supper, his place is significant – "leaning on Jesus' bosom", which is to say, reclining (as the ancient custom was) next to Jesus, and in a position (both literal and

figurative) to ask Jesus a delicate question (13:23-26). He was present at the trial of Jesus before Annas (18:15-16). He was the only male disciple to venture forth at the cross, to him Jesus entrusted his mother (19:26-27), and he was at the last resurrection appearance (chapter 21).

Witness as he was to these key moments in Jesus' ministry, his breakthrough to understanding them seems to have happened on Easter (20:3-10). With Peter he went to see the empty tomb – the two of them thus providing eyewitness testimony that later Christians needed in order to believe without seeing – but, unlike Peter, he perceived the significance of what they both saw: "he saw and believed" (20:8). He grasped the truth of the empty tomb and abandoned grave-clothes.

Because of his piercing insight St. John is called the Divine, and his symbol is the eagle, the bird which, in ancient lore, can fly highest, see furthest, and gaze at the sun without blinking – an image of the one who beheld the glory of Christ, "the glory as of the only-begotten of the Father" (1:14). His insight is not abstract curiosity: it is born of love. As Benedict XIV notes, in *The Imitation of Christ* (III. v.3-4), Thomas à Kempis supplies an apt comment on St. John's teaching and example: "the love of Jesus ... spurs us on to do great things, and excites us to desire always that which is most perfect. Love will tend upwards" [like the eagle!] "and is not to be detained by things beneath. Love will be at liberty and free from all worldly affections ... for love proceeds from God and cannot rest but in God above all things created. The lover flies, runs, and rejoices, he is free and not held. He give all for all and has all in all, because he rests in one sovereign good above all, from whom all good flows and proceeds."

The old custom on Saint John's Day was to drink the poculum charitatis, the loving-cup, in the saint's honour. It is a wonderful image of the fellowship of the church united in this love of the "one sovereign good above all, from all good flows": "truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3). How striking then (and plausible) the story recounted by St. Jerome, that when age made it impossible for John to preach, John would say, "My little children, love one another" When they asked why he always said the same thing, he answered, "Because it is the word of the Lord, and if you keep it, you do enough". And that's how we honour Saint John.

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