

SERMON PREACHED AT SJH EASTER 4 YEAR C 12 MAY 2019

The five panels running across the east window of our church show scenes in the life of S. John. There is his call from being a fisherman to become a disciple. There is the last supper, where he was reclining close to Jesus. There is his presence with Mary, the mother of Jesus, at the crucifixion. He appears with S. Peter healing a lame man, an incident recorded in the book of Acts. And in the central panel he is shown writing in a book. That seems to depict him writing the book of Revelation. In the first chapter of that book, John writes, 'I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, "Write what you see in a book...".'

The traditional view is that the disciple John, the brother of James, wrote the gospel which bears his name, the book of Revelation, and the three letters which bear his name in the New Testament. That may be the case, or there might have been more than one person called John. But even if the books were written by different hands, there are definite similarities between them.

In the book of Revelation, from which today's second reading comes, the most frequent designation of Jesus is 'the Lamb'. This has associations with the lamb sacrificed at the Jewish Passover to preserve the lives of the Jewish people, and with the figure of the suffering servant in the prophet Isaiah: 'As a sheep before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth.' In today's reading 'Lamb' is used four times. This title also occurs in S. John's gospel. John the Baptist (definitely a different John) sees Jesus and declares, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" – words that are regularly used in our worship.

In ancient writings, symbols are often quite elastic, used in ways which we wouldn't regard as strictly logical. At the end of the passage from Revelation, the Lamb becomes a shepherd – it couldn't happen in real life, but it makes sense when applied to our Lord. He was the lamb sacrificed for us; risen from the dead he is our guide and protector, a shepherd. In John's gospel, Jesus describes himself as the good shepherd, and in today's extract Jesus talks about his sheep. So the Lamb-shepherd imagery is one link between these two New Testament books.

Another link is the closeness between Jesus and God his Father. In today's gospel passage, Jesus talks about the works he does in his Father's name. Putting it colloquially, we might say they're in the same business. In successive verses he says no one can snatch the sheep out of his hand, and then that no one can snatch them out of his Father's hand. Father and Son are united in love and saving action. Jesus declares, "The Father and I are one."

In the vision described in today's passage from Revelation, the closeness is physical. A great multitude is standing before the throne and before the Lamb – the throne being God's seat of course. The multitude cry out, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" Again there's a unity in what they do. And in a slightly confusing expression, the Lamb is said to be at the centre of the throne.

All this may seem rather theoretical, but it's actually the basis of the Christian message that we have to make our own and proclaim to others. It can be expressed in two statements:

- Jesus shows us what God is like;
- God has acted in Jesus to save the world.

Both these statements have to be unpacked, and in anyone's life coming to see what they mean will be a process. Most people don't ask specifically religious questions, but at some point will ask questions such as 'What's life all about?' or 'What's the meaning in things that have happened?' The church does itself no favours by offering simplistic answers, or by coming out with heavy doctrine, but it can listen to what people are saying, and tell the Christian story. Belief in God is just as reasonable as belief that there is no God. For most people, the most important things in their lives are relationships, and the Christian can point out that there is relationship within God's being: Father and Son, and as the church came to understand, the Holy Spirit also. Through the Son, God entered a relationship with the human world; indeed he became part of the human family. We look at the qualities of Jesus – his love, his concern for the poor and weak, his challenge to the misuse of power, his self-sacrifice – and we begin to see the relevance of the Christian story to the human situation. It's a story which can be traced back to creation; the writers of scripture are part of that story, as we are. Evangelism is inviting people to join the community which will become part of that multitude in heaven declaring, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"