

The Feast of St John – Rev John Spring – Sunday 9th May 2010.

Readings: Proverbs 8:22-31, Psalm 97, 1 John 1:1-5, John 20:1-8, 21:2-8

Do you ever wonder why we dedicate churches to saints? Not all churches do, and those who do so do so less and less. Yet it is still a standard practice in the Anglican Church. So why do we do it?

As a lead in to the thoughts I want to explore with you, let me ask another question. Imagine there is a great big sign out at the front of this church and it says,

“We are the people of Saint John. We are like him.
If you want to know about him, look at us.
If you want to understand us, look at him,
because we live the life and faith he taught.”

Would *you* be comfortable with that? And would he be proud to own *us*?

But first, why do we dedicate churches to saints? In ancient and medieval times, many dedications amounted to a claim to some historical association with the saint, or to an advertisement that the church housed the relics of the saint. However, we cannot claim that St John ever visited Sorrento, nor are we advertising the fact that we hold pieces of his body or holy objects which he touched. So these are not the case for us.

Another basis of dedication is the placement of a church under the patronage and protection of the saint. In part this reflects the ancient belief that great saints continue to embody concentrations of divine and spiritual power and that churches use dedication to invoke that power.

On the other hand, dedication also reflects the human custom of patronage. We all know that, in many areas of life, if you want to get on, it is an advantage for you to have *sponsors*, people in positions of influence who can speak for you and recommend you. That is how the world works.

In earlier times, however, sponsorship or patronage was not just a useful option, but a powerful, controlling and discriminating force in society. People simply had to have patrons in order to be recognised, to advance in society, to get the funds needed to carry out their work in the arts, science, music and religion, and to gain appointments. Patronage was also a way of ensuring that people appointed to lucrative and influential offices had well-known and influential others who could vouch for their *bona fides*, guarantee their work and help to manage them.

In many instances of course, this worked. However, in others, the person looking to enjoy the benefits of patronage was bitterly disappointed. The Elizabethan and Jacobean poet and playwright George Chapman was a tutor in Classics to the young and glamorous Henry, Prince of Wales. With the Prince's encouragement, he undertook the translation of the Greek poet Homer. Henry also promised that, when the work was finished, Chapman would be richly rewarded. However, when the work

was near completion, the Prince died of typhoid. Chapman laboured on, however, assuring himself that Henry's Father, James the First, would honour his son's commitments. Yet, when Chapman finally presented the huge volume to the king, James thanked him but gave him nothing. Now, having spent all his strength on this great work, and grown old doing it, Chapman had nothing more to offer the world of learning, literature and theatre. He sank into bitter poverty, and died in obscurity in a northern outreach of London, far from court, city and theatre.

A similar case is that of Samuel Johnson. Johnson is the English writer most often quoted after Shakespeare and most of the quotations come from his famous dictionary. However, during the years when he was compiling this huge work, he (like many others) sought a patron in the Earl of Chesterfield, a very wealthy man who really had not the slightest interest in anything Johnson was doing and repeatedly turned away his appeals for help. However, when the dictionary was about to be published and was being touted as an enormous impending success, Chesterfield rushed to associate himself with it. In response, Johnson wrote a famous letter, in which he said,

“When, upon some slight encouragement, I first visited your lordship, I was overpowered . . . by the enchantment of your address . . . but I found my attendance so little encouraged, that neither pride nor modesty would suffer me to continue it. When I had once addressed your Lordship in public, I had exhausted all the art of pleasing which a retired and uncourtly scholar can possess. I had done all that I could; and no man is well pleased to have his all neglected, be it ever so little. Seven years, my lord, have now passed, since I waited in your outward rooms, or was repulsed from your door; during which time I have been pushing on my work through difficulties, of which it is useless to complain, and have brought it, at last, to the verge of publication, without one act of assistance, one word of encouragement, or one smile of favour. Is not a patron, my Lord, one who looks with unconcern on a man struggling for life in the water, and, when he has reached ground, encumbers him with help?”

Patronage was crucial in the days before government funding of education, the arts and sciences and yet ordinary human patrons could prove unreliable. Placing a church, a city, a whole country, under the patronage of a *saint*, however, was attended by no such risk. Here at St John's, it entails no specific *promises* of practical, material or financial assistance on St John's part. Rather, to begin with, dedication, as a means of establishing the patronage of the saint, is a way of calling upon the saint to pray to God, on the church's behalf, for *divine* blessing and protection. For some of us, this would still be important here at St John's. Our desire is that, like us, Saint John would be praying and these (with apologies to the songwriter, Helen Taylor) might be his words:

Bless this house, O Lord, we pray,
Make it safe by night and day;
Bless these walls so firm and stout;
Keeping want and trouble out;
Bless the roof and gables tall,
Let thy peace lie over all;
Bless this door that it may prove

Ever open to joy and love.

Bless these windows shining bright,
Letting in God's heavenly light;
Bless the hearts a-blazing here,
Full of love and holy cheer;
Bless the folk who meet herein;
Keep them pure and free from sin;
Bless us all that we may be,
Fit, O Lord, to dwell with Thee.

So, by dedicating this church to Saint John we are asking the Apostle to continue to pray for the building itself as a place of worship, and also for the church which meets in this place - for our well-being, for our adherence to the truth and our fidelity to Jesus Christ, and for our mission, witness and ministry.

As Anglicans, however, and as heirs of the Reformation, that is as a church both *Catholic and Reformed*, our agenda goes well beyond asking for the help of the prayers of the saint. Rather, in the Anglican Church, the dedication of churches is an educational exercise. We do it here to advertise the name of the saint, to awaken interest in him and in his life, works and teachings, and to point beyond the saint to God, whose servant he is. So today, as we celebrate St John and the naming of this church in his honour, we not only seek his patronage and protection, but we also hold up the person, life, works and writings of St John before ourselves and (hopefully) before the world.

Of course, it is the church, that is, *the people*, who must do this. No church building can survive unless those who meet within it do this. And yet, day in and day out, we expect this church *building* to perform this task for us as well. We rely upon this building, upon its atmosphere and character, to hold up to the passing world not only the saint, but the faith he taught and the God in whom he believed, and to point people passing by towards heaven.

So another dimension of dedication has more to do with St John, **with what he wrote and what he taught**. For example, in 1 John 1:4, Saint John says, “We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete”. So an important part of dedication is bound up with the *joy* of the good news.

Yet, upon reflection, this might seem an unusual thing to say - “**We** are writing these things so that **our** joy may be complete”. Who is we? And who is “our”? Whose joy is at issue here? In another letter, in 2 John, 1, verse 12, John says, “Although I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink; instead I **hope to come to you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete**”. So, in John **seeing** those to whom he is writing, and in their **seeing** him, their common joy is made complete. It is not what will be *said* by him, or them, that will bring joy. It will be in their **seeing** each other. And that makes ready sense.

But that is not what John says in 1 John 1:4. Here he says, “*We are writing* these things so that *our* joy may be complete.” At first it might seem that John just wants to

increase his *own* happiness, that he is really saying, “*I* am writings these things so that *my* joy may be complete”. Now there can be a truth in this. When we have news to tell, and we tell someone the good news, we feel even better about the news than we did before. We affirm it and increase its reality in our own minds. We, as it were, receive it all over again as we see how others receive it. So, we take pleasure in sharing our knowledge. We take pride, too, in having *done our job* as an authorized bearer of good news and teacher, and perhaps we enjoy some kudos as a result. So there is truth in saying there is joy for me in telling *you* good news. But, still, I don’t think that is what John is saying here.

John’s first use of the first person plural – “We” – seems to me to be quite different from his second use of it – “our”. In the first instance, I believe, John refers to **himself** in the formal plural. “We” means “I”. So he says, “**I** am writing these things to you”. But then in the second instance, I think the plural “our” is not formal but literal. “Our” means “yours and mine”. So what he says is “**I** am writing these things to **you**, so that **our** joy – **yours and mine** - may be complete”.

And so? Well, I further understand and put it to you, that John’s message “concerning the word of life”, concerning Jesus the Word of God, the Logos, is not just a communication from John to his readers that will make *him* happy to tell it, and that will make *them* happy to hear it.

Rather, it is teaching and testimony, which he *shares* with them, and which **makes him and them one in the truth**. Then, it is *out of* this unity in the truth that their common joy arises. It is *in* this unity in the truth that **their common joy** is made complete. A joy shared, they say, is a joy doubled. John agrees. “*I* am writing these things so that *our* joy may be complete”.

John’s message also leads *all of them*, the writer and his readers, into greater fellowship with God. In verse 3, John goes on to say, “. . . we declare to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly **our** fellowship is **with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ**”. *Our* fellowship.

But what, precisely, is the truth in which we are one and in which we have complete joy?

We are all familiar with the writings attributed to John the Apostle – his gospel, his surviving letters, and the book of the Revelation. What he writes in these is not mainly the story Jesus’ mission, death and resurrection. His real interest is in setting down Jesus’ **teaching** and, in our Second Reading this morning, he sums up this teaching in verse 5 where he says,

“This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you,
that **God is light and in him there is no darkness at all**”.

Now, we have no other record that Jesus actually said these words, although he easily might have. We *do* have him talking about himself as the light of the world, saying, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will *never walk in darkness* . . . (John 8.12) He also says, “I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should *not remain in the darkness*” (John 12.46). So if Jesus is the light of the world, and there is no darkness in Jesus, and Jesus is God, then *ergo* God is light in

whom there is no darkness at all. *Q.E.D. Quod Est Demonstrandum*. Even so, we do not have a record of Jesus himself saying that God is light in whom there is no darkness at all.

Perhaps the nearest thing in Scripture to John's summary of Jesus' teaching is not in a gospel but in another letter - the letter of Saint *James*, which says that "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from **the Father of lights**, with whom there is **no variation or shadow** due to change" (James 1:17). So if John says it, and James says it, perhaps somewhere along the line Jesus did say it. It just happens, no-one recorded it in a gospel.

Today, then, we are united in the truth that God is light and in him there is no darkness whatever, and in that truth and that unity, those who share it have their joy made complete, the joy we share with St John our patron.

I hope you see, now, that dedication is not just a polite formality, a bit of Christian oldey-worldiness, reminding us of England. It is advertising. It is teaching, It is a statement about who and what we are and what we believe, and wherein lies our joy and, indeed, our hope. However because it is a way of saying something about us, it has serious implications. It is like putting up that sign I mentioned, saying,

"We are people of Saint John. We are just like him. If you want to know about him, look at us. If you want to understand us, look at him; read what he wrote and see how he lived, because we live the life and faith he taught."

God grant, then, that, when people see the dedication of this church, and meet us, and associate us with him, they don't conclude this is false advertising. God grant that they find good reason to say that our sign speaks the truth.

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