



## *Christmas 1 / St John the Evangelist 2020*

Not the President of the United States, not the double headed Tzar, not even Eddie the ski jumper - today is the day of the Eagle. The four living creatures in our apse, at the foot of the Throne of Grace, and it the mosaic round the side, come from St John's revelation – that technicolour masterpiece at the end of the New Testament. They have always been understood as representative of the 4 Gospel writers: Mark the Lion, Matthew the angel, Luke the Ox and John, today's saint, soaring above the world majestic, beautiful, with razor sharp talons: the eagle. So fitting for St John.

St John is a giant, the writer of the Gospel, pastoral letters also in the New Testament and the apocalyptic epic of Revelation. At times, St John has caused scholars to scratch their heads – is he the writer of all three, is he also the Beloved Disciple of whom he speaks in John's Gospel (the one at the foot of the cross with Blessed Mary in the Gospel, as shown in our mosaic above the altar, the one with his head on The Lord's breast at the last supper)? There is no reason to separate these figures, and many scholars have come full circle back to that place. I see no reason they can't all sit together in the same man. In fact, there are many good reasons to suggest this.

It also gives St John, evangelist and divine, a unique place amongst the Towering figures of the apostolic age. Because many were in the prime of life when they met Jesus, and most of them were killed in the course of their ministries. Having gone home, dejected after the Crucifixion, after the Resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost they were *unstoppable*. Traversing the known world, imprisonment, abuse, hardship and death, they were made unstoppable in their proclaiming of what God has done in Christ because they had *seen* it and *known* it. [11am: just as St John says in today's first reading]. So, they all die in their prime. Except John.

By the time St John writes his Gospel (the last chronologically) he is an old man. St John's Gospel is the fruit of a life time of living out and living with Jesus Christ. It is truly a great work of theology, a lasagne-layering of account and prayer and parable and purpose – each mouthful contains it all.

A curry or stew is always better the next day, or even the day after that. I am always struck when a great work of art is the fruit of 10 years or more of the artist's work and rework, living with it, being formed *by* the painting as much as forming it. So, St John's Gospel is the result of a lifetime of distilling and formation.

[11am: Just as we see in the extraordinary final words of St John which are today's Gospel]

St John's Gospel is rightly called a pool in which children can paddle and elephants can wade.

[8.30am BCP: If in doubt, look at today's Gospel. St John's Prologue to His Gospel. Such an extraordinary work of poetry, Greek philosophy, ancient Hebrew wisdom, literary beauty, heavyweight theological truthfulness and human rawness.

The first time I heard these words I was seven, I think. In a non-church community primary school in Surrey. I didn't go to church, my family didn't. I knew very little of God. But I will never forget, Mrs Sage our near-retirement headteacher reading St John's prologue to us in assembly. King James' language. None of us had a clue what was going on, except that these words were more powerful than ordinary words. It was only more than a decade later when I came to faith at university and I went to my first Christmas having *chosen* to be a Christian, that it all came flooding back. It was and is a great gift.]

You could spend the rest of your days reading, meditating and studying St John's writings and still not plumb their depths.

But do start! 2021 will be full of uncertainty and plenty of darkness, now is *exactly* the time to turn to the light and get stuck in there. Let the eagle soar above and show you the way.

