

Congratulations to everyone who has survived the excitement, entertainment and catering (provision and/or consumption) of Christmas, and is now looking forward to a few days' peace and quiet before we gird up our loins for the New Year. You might think that the church calendar-compilers would let us have a bit of a break – after all, there are still ten days of Christmas before Epiphany, and the Christmas season officially lasts for forty days. But no, they have a different agenda. December 25<sup>th</sup>: Christmas, the miracle of the Incarnation. December 26<sup>th</sup>: St Stephen, the first Christian martyr. December 27<sup>th</sup>: St John, the first theologian. December 28<sup>th</sup>: Holy Innocents, the result of a fearful, insecure ruler taking desperate measures to suppress a potential rival. December 29<sup>th</sup>: Thomas a Becket, the English archbishop killed for supporting the rights and privileges of the church against the wishes of the king. Within five days we can see clearly that not only was Jesus' life and ministry on earth not going to be straightforward, but that circumstances were not going to be any easier for those who believed in him and tried to follow his teachings.

Today's focus is on St John, who is described in the calendar as 'Apostle and Evangelist'. This means that we may be commemorating more than one person because, despite what it says at the end of today's Gospel reading, it is by no means certain that the Apostle John – son of Zebedee and brother of James – actually wrote the Gospel. Nor can we be sure that the gospel-writer wrote the three letters of John, or whether one, or both, or any of these people wrote the Book of Revelation. It's Christmas, so I won't go into the technical reasons for this, but the discussion has certainly taken up as many books as the gospel-writer thought would be needed to contain all Jesus' activities. For this morning, we'll stick with John, Apostle and Evangelist.

John the Apostle was the beloved disciple, perhaps closer to Jesus than any other. He was the Galilean fisherman, one of the first to be called and one of the inner circle who were present at the Transfiguration and other extremely significant events. John went into the High Priest's courtyard when Jesus was arrested, he stood at the foot of the cross and took Jesus' mother into his care. He was one of the first witnesses of the resurrection and an important figure in the early church, although Jesus had given the leadership to Peter. Peter himself seems to have been surprised by this, which may be why, in the Gospel reading, he immediately asks Jesus: 'What am I to do about John?' and is firmly told that it is none of his business.

John the Evangelist composed the fourth Gospel, which is very different from the other three. He was not concerned to create a historical narrative. Instead he took a series of events from Jesus' life and constructed a deeply reflective, philosophical theology around them, to show the true meaning of the presence of the incarnate God with us. The three Letters of John were written to a Christian community experiencing persecution – as John himself did in the reign of the Emperor Domitian. But he escaped, and is thought to have written the Book of Revelation on the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea. Revelation is a description of a protracted and quite extraordinary apocalyptic vision, partly inspired by John's own experiences.

Our 'Thought for the Day' comes both from the Gospel and the first Letter. I wrote this while listening to the Service of Nine Lessons and Carols, and reached this point just as the Provost of Kings College began to read the ninth lesson – John 1. 1-14. Here in the Letter we have the same message: God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. The light has come into the world, and it cannot be overcome. The light illuminates everything. It exposes all our shortcomings, all our failings, all our misdeeds. If we try to pretend we are perfect, we are condemned to stay in the

darkness, but if we acknowledge our faults God will forgive them. We can then walk in the light, we will have nothing to be afraid of, and we will have fellowship with each another and with Jesus. This is the ultimate meaning of Christmas, and John makes it more explicit, more tangible, more illuminating than any other evangelist. Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us what Jesus did and said, how people reacted to him and how the three years of his ministry unfolded. John, Apostle and Evangelist, tells us what Jesus means.