

## **EPILOGUE : JOHN 21:1-25**

## Epilogue

Though this Epilogue was added to the already completed Gospel, it was always part of the Gospel which circulated in the early Christian communities. Its author was a member of the same community and its spirit and content are integrated beautifully with the spirit and themes of the rest of the Gospel. Its author felt free to make this addition, encouraged by John's own conclusion which acknowledged that 'Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples' (20:30). Here was one sign which the author of the Epilogue thought it important to add.

As we shall observe when analysing the Epilogue, one reason for the addition was the death of the Beloved Disciple. We know from other writings of the New Testament that the resurrection of Jesus, the 'first fruits of those who have died' (1Corinthians 15:20), encouraged an expectation that the rest of the harvest would follow quickly. Many expected the imminent end of the world. The long life of the Beloved Disciple and the memory of a promise made to him by Jesus led his community to expect Jesus to come in glory while he was still alive. His death caused a crisis of faith for many. Some explanation was required.

There was also the danger that the community which had relied so heavily on the presence, witness and charismatic leadership of the Beloved Disciple could lose its way without him. While respecting the special characteristics of the community, the author of the Epilogue sensed the need to integrate it more fully into the life of the wider Church. Though Peter was no longer alive, having been crucified in Rome in 64AD, his pastoral role as leader of the disciples and as a symbol of their unity remained important. The author wished to reinforce this and to clarify the relationship between Peter and the Beloved Disciple. It was important that the community see itself as part of the wider 'catholic' community. Jesus prayed that his disciples would be one with him in the life of communion which he enjoyed with his Father. One fruit of this would be their communion with each other.

Both these issues are addressed here in the context of a post-crucifixion appearance of the risen and glorified Jesus. We have already noted the tradition that Jesus revealed himself to his disciples at a meal (see John 20:19-29; also Luke 24:30-31; 24:41-43; Acts 10:41; Mark 16:14). There is also a tradition that Jesus revealed himself to Peter (see 1Corinthians 15:5, Luke 24:34 and Mark 16:7; also Luke 22:31-32). It is likely that elements of this encounter between Peter and the risen Jesus have been incorporated by Matthew into his portrayal of the scene at Caesarea Philippi (Matthew 16:18-19a) and by Luke into his portrayal of the calling of Peter (Luke 5:1-11).

What we have here in this Epilogue seems to be a composite of these two traditions: one focusing on a meal in which Jesus reveals himself to his disciples, the other centring on Peter which tells of a miraculous catch of fish, Peter's recognition of the risen Jesus and Jesus' commissioning Peter in his pastoral role as leader of the community.

The disciples, it seems, fled Jerusalem when Jesus was captured and crucified. As Jesus said at the last supper: 'The hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each one to his home, and you will leave me alone' (16:32). For those mentioned here this meant returning to Galilee.

Simon Peter and Thomas have already featured in John chapter twenty. Nathanael was mentioned among Jesus' first followers (1:45-50). On that occasion Jesus promised that he would see greater things. This may account for his being named here. The sons of Zebedee have not been mentioned before, and two others make up a group of seven. One of the seven is the Beloved Disciple (which keeps open the possibility that the tradition identifying him as John may be correct). The key point the author is making is that they were 'gathered together'.

Peter decides to go back to his old profession, fishing on the Sea of Tiberias (already mentioned in 6:1). The others go with him. Though the author links this scene with the two scenes of John 20:19-29 by saying that this was Jesus' third appearance (21:14), it is clear that we are not to read the scenes as having happened in sequence. There is no indication in this scene of any previous encounter with the risen Jesus.

With dramatic irony, the author tells us that it is night and that they caught nothing (compare Luke 5:5). Once we have encountered Jesus we cannot pretend that nothing has happened. It is impossible to go back. Furthermore, as Jesus said: 'Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing' (15:5). These men whom Jesus called to follow him and to carry on his mission ('from now on you will be catching people', Luke 5:20) cannot succeed without him.

Jesus, however, is present with them. Their failure to recognise him is a feature of all the apparition narratives (see commentary on 20:14; also 20:24-29). Seeing the risen Jesus is essentially a seeing-in-faith. With Jesus comes the light. Speaking to them as those who, being born again, are children of God (1:12; 13:33; compare 1John 2:14, 2:18), Jesus gives instructions from the shore and a miraculous catch ensues (compare Luke 5:6-7).

**<sup>1</sup>After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way.**

**<sup>2</sup>Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples.**

**<sup>3</sup>Simon Peter said to them, 'I am going fishing.'**

**They said to him, 'We will go with you.' They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.**

**<sup>4</sup>Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.**

**<sup>5</sup>Jesus said to them, 'Children, you have no fish, have you?' They answered him, 'No.'**

**<sup>6</sup>He said to them, 'Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.'**

**So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish.**

**<sup>7</sup>That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!'**

**When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea.**

**<sup>8</sup>But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.**

**<sup>9</sup>When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread.**

**<sup>10</sup>Jesus said to them, 'Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.'**

**<sup>11</sup>So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn.**

**<sup>12</sup>Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast.'**

**Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, 'Who are you?' because they knew it was the Lord.**

**<sup>13</sup>Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.**

**<sup>14</sup>This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.**

As in the scene of the empty tomb, it is the Beloved Disciple who recognises the sign (compare 20:8). As with Mary Magdalene it is the one who loves who recognises that 'it is the Lord' (compare 20:18). We recall Jesus' promise: 'I will reveal myself to the one who loves me' (14:21).

When Mary Magdalene came with news of the empty tomb, Peter immediately ran to see what had happened. As soon as the Beloved Disciple says that the stranger on the beach is Jesus, Peter, keen to be with him, tucks into his belt the loose fitting fisherman's smock which is his only clothing and plunges into the water.

When the others arrive by boat they find that Jesus has prepared a meal for them. In his hour of trial they had scattered and left him alone (16:32). He will never leave them. In the Eucharist they experience his faithful and forgiving love. He wants them to bring to this shared meal all that they have done through his grace. The author highlights Peter's role as the leader of the disciples. It is he who hauls the net ashore and so it is not torn. The community of the Beloved Disciple must not tear itself away from the wider community and from its leader.

The miraculous haul is symbolic of the multitude of people whom the risen Jesus was drawing to himself through the ministry of his disciples (see 12:32).

Once again we are reminded that seeing and recognising the risen Jesus is not a matter of physical sight. 'They knew it was the Lord' with a knowledge that transcends the physical. There are echoes here of the multiplication of bread and fish recorded in chapter six, with the same Eucharistic symbolism. We are reminded also of Luke's narrative of the disciples at Emmaus who recognised the risen Jesus 'in the breaking of the bread' (Luke 24:35).

It is at this communion breakfast which the risen Jesus has prepared for his disciples that he offers forgiveness to Peter and commissions him to carry out a special role of caring for the community of Jesus' disciples. Jesus, the good shepherd, has lain down his life for his sheep (10:11,15). Now, as the risen Lord, he delegates Peter to be his instrument as shepherd of the flock.

Luke alludes to this when he has Jesus say to Peter at the last supper: 'I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers' (Luke 22:32). Matthew chooses to speak of this same commissioning in the scene at Caesarea Philippi: 'You are Peter (Greek: *petros*), and on this rock (Greek: *petra*) I will build my church' (Matthew 16:18).

We have just been reminded of the fact that we can carry out our mission only to the extent that we are united to Jesus and are living his life. Without him we can fish all night and catch nothing (21:3). Peter can shepherd Jesus' flock only to the extent that he is united to Jesus. Jesus, therefore, asks him about his love. At the last supper the impetuous Peter declared: 'I will lay down my life for you' (13:37). When the time came, his courage failed and he ended up denying Jesus, not once or twice, but persistently ('three times', 13:38; see 18:17,25-27).

Referring back to Peter's boast, the risen Jesus says to him: 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?' The word he uses for love (*agapân*) means: 'Are you committed to me? Will you be faithful to the covenant love we have?' Peter knows he can be fickle; he knows, too, that he is no better than the others. He responds: 'Yes. Lord, you know that I love you'. However, for love he does not use *agapân*, but rather *philein*. He makes no claim to being faithful, for he knows he can fail. He certainly is not boasting that he is better than the others. Rather, he assures Jesus that he is his friend, that he feels for him and cares about him, that his heart is deeply attached to him. Jesus' response is immediate, for the one condition for the pastoral role which he wishes to give to Peter is humble love: 'Feed my lambs'. Jesus remains the Shepherd and they are his lambs, but he is commissioning Peter to feed them.

**<sup>15</sup>When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?'**

**He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.'**

**Jesus said to him, 'Feed my lambs.'**

<sup>16</sup>A second time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?'

He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.'

Jesus said to him, 'Tend my sheep.'

<sup>17</sup>He said to him the third time, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?'

Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' And he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.'

Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep.'

Jesus repeats his opening question, though now he drops out all reference to the others. Peter knows his weakness, but he can re-affirm his friendship. And, once again, Jesus says: 'Tend my sheep'. They are Jesus' sheep. He is the good shepherd (10:11). They do not belong to Peter, but Peter is to guide them and care for them.

Jesus' third question is different. He no longer speaks of commitment and fidelity. Rather he takes Peter's own word for love (*philein*) and asks Peter is he really his friend. Does he really care about Jesus? Is he truly fond of him? Peter's hurt is a healing one. Jesus is allowing him to make up for the three-fold denial. With a humble, repentant spirit, he declares: 'Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you'. All self-assurance has gone. Jesus, however, is assured of Peter's love and so, for a third time, he commissions Peter to express his love in caring for those whom Jesus loves.

Not all scholars agree that we should understand *agapân* and *philein* as having different nuances in this passage. Augustine understood them as saying the same thing in different words (Tractate 123.5). It is not easy to disagree with such a great master of rhetoric as Augustine, but it seems difficult in such a dramatic encounter to hear a shift of terminology without looking for a shift in nuance.

It is interesting in this context to recall Peter's words in his First Letter in which he is advising others who share in the organisational leadership of the community:

As an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it – not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away. In the same way, you who are younger must accept the authority of the elders. And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble'(Proverbs 3:34).

– 1Peter 5:1-5

Jesus, the good shepherd laid down his life for his sheep (10:11,15). Now that Peter has learned humility and has experienced the healing power of Jesus' forgiveness, he is able to do what, in love but with presumption, he said he would do: 'I will lay down my life for you'(13:37). He was crucified in Rome during the persecution of the Roman Christians under Nero (64AD).

The author reminds his readers that Jesus predicted this. Verse nineteen links this prediction with Jesus' prediction of his own death (see 12:33; 18:32). The love in the heart of Jesus which led him to lay down his life gave glory to God by revealing God as a God of love (17:4). Peter's death would do the same. In the meantime, Jesus calls Peter, once again, to be his disciple: 'Follow me'.

We recall another statement from Peter's letter: 'To this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps'(1Peter 2:21).

**<sup>18</sup>Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.'**

**<sup>19</sup>(He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.)**

**After this he said to him, 'Follow me.'**

**<sup>20</sup>Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; he was the one who had reclined next to Jesus at the supper and had said, ‘Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?’**

**<sup>21</sup>When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, ‘Lord, what about him?’**

**<sup>22</sup>Jesus said to him, ‘If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!’**

**<sup>23</sup>So the rumour spread in the community that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but, ‘If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?’**

**<sup>24</sup>This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true.**

As noted in introducing this Epilogue, a prediction of Jesus concerning the Beloved Disciple had been understood as a promise that he would remain alive to see the final coming of Jesus in glory. His death, therefore, caused a crisis of faith in the community. The author of the Epilogue explains that Jesus’ words do not support the rumour. Verse twenty-four indicates that Jesus’ words referred to the witness of the Beloved Disciple not to his staying alive. His witness expressed in the Gospel to which this Epilogue is being appended will last till the parousia.

Is the author claiming that the Beloved Disciple personally carried out the actual writing of the Gospel? Is he saying that the Beloved Disciple personally dictated or at least directed the writing? Or is he saying that it is the memories, the preaching, teaching (and perhaps writing) of the Beloved Disciple that is the source of the tradition recorded in the Gospel? Whatever position scholars take in their response to this question, the Beloved Disciple can be called the author of the Gospel.

When the author of the Epilogue claims: ‘*we* know that his testimony is true’, he is speaking for himself as representative of a tradition that is drawn significantly from the witness of the Beloved Disciple. In claiming that the witness of the Beloved Disciple is true, he is claiming that the Gospel gives us a trustworthy understanding of the revelation of God which Jesus gave in his words and deeds. The life of the Beloved Disciple was proof that he had penetrated to the inner meaning of the revelation of Jesus to whom, as the Beloved Disciple, he was especially dear.

Jesus’ final words to Peter are the last words spoken by Jesus in the Gospel: ‘Follow me’. They are addressed to every reader of the Gospel. We are not facing the same crisis that faced the community of the Beloved Disciple. We may not be facing a similar persecution. Whatever the complexities of our lives, Jesus says to us as he said to Peter: ‘Follow me’.

**Conclusion**

The final sentence picks up the gist of the conclusion written by the Gospel author (see 20:30) and justifies the Epilogue as an example of ‘the many other things that Jesus did’. The world could not contain all that could be written, not so much because of the quantity, but because of the impossibility of giving expression in human writing to the wonders of Jesus and his revelation. In the words of Origen, the earliest commentator on John:

The things which are in him in whom ‘all the fullness of divinity was pleased to dwell bodily’ (Colossians 1:19; 2:9) are by no means contained in writings.

– Commentary on John 1.60

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I realise something of how daring it is to add yet another commentary to the many books that have been written on the Gospel of the Beloved Disciple. It has, however, been a labour of love.

My life has been enriched by the insights gleaned from the scholars and lovers of Jesus who have commented on the Gospel of John over the centuries. They all keep inviting us to draw close to the heart of Jesus, there to share in the intimacy of God’s embrace. I pray that I have succeeded in some small way in sharing some of their insights with you.

In the last of his tractates on John, Augustine reminds us:

John does not drink alone from the fountain of the Lord’s breast ... The Lord himself according to each person’s capacity spreads his Gospel to be drunk by all in the whole world.

– Tractate 124.7

**<sup>25</sup>But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.**