Sexagesima 2 before Lent – how to read St. John’s Gospel

In my time as a parish priest, I enjoyed sitting down with small groups and letting them question me.  Not that I thought I could answer their questions, but they were usually questions about church, the Bible, and Christian faith and life. So I was on home ground. I tried to be simple and candid, and said we were all in it together and there were no stock answers. There were always things we could discover together.

One of the common things they asked about was the Bible. Why does St John's gospel seem so different from the others?

People said they understood the stories from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The Fourth Gospel, however, was different and hard to understand.

I told them that the first three gospels are like photograph albums. They give pictures of Jesus at work. They illustrate His teaching from early manhood to His death and resurrection.

But the fourth gospel is different. It's like a portrait. It is very carefully painted. It tries to bring out the nature of Jesus, how He saw Himself, and His relationship to His father.

That came over to us very strongly in the reading just now. There were no birth stories, or stories of Jesus's childhood. as there are in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. St. John's gospel took us right back to Genesis, the first book in the Bible, to the beginning of the creation. "**In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things were made by Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made."**

St. John immediately identifies Jesus as the Son of God.

He calls Him the WORD of God. Jesus does everything with God in expressing the Divine will. The beginning of the gospel tells us that creation is the work of God.

God spoke. Then it happened.  Creation is the expression of that divine love between Father and Son.

More than just the making of things, it was the bringing of divine love, joy, peace, and order into what was made, that was special. These lovely things crowned God's creation.

Then the reading we heard this morning reminds us that the world didn't respond in the way God had hoped, but went its own way. People ignored God and did their own thing.

The gospel then goes on to tell us that Jesus, the Word of God, became one of us, so that He could put the world on the right track, and lead us back again to God. That was the plan, if we can put it like that, of what the fourth gospel set out to say to people.

If you have found the fourth gospel a bit difficult, maybe it will help if you think about it in the way I've suggested.

Matthew, Mark and Luke are like photograph albums of what Jesus said and did. They are graphic accounts. You can understand them and remember them.

St. John's Gospel is more like a painting of our Lord as the Son of God from the beginning of time. Like all famous paintings, every time you look at them you see something different, something new, and something mysterious.

It's the same with the portrait of Jesus in the fourth gospel. There's always something new to catch your eye.

 A famous Spanish saint of the 16th century put it like this, as he pondered on the fourth gospel. He said, "God spoke one word. That word was His Son. He utters Him in eternal silence, and it is in silence we shall hear Him".

If you find St. John's gospel hard to read, take that Saint at his word.  Find a quiet place. Read a few verses or a short section. Look at the portrait of Jesus in your mind's eye.

Stay with it. Let it be God's WORD for you.

Let it speak to you and be personal, full of God's love.

With you and always around you.

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