

## Easter V Year C 2025

The bible... you know, that big white book on your bedside table that you read every day.... The bible didn't just appear out of nowhere. Books of the Hebrew bible were being written and revised as early as the fifth century B.C.E. In that time of captivity and repatriation, Scribes began putting to paper the legends told by their ancestors; the Torah, the Jewish law, was edited and codified. There were dozens, if not hundreds, of literary contributions to the sacred lore of Israel which never made it into the official canon of scripture. The same, of course, is true of the New Testament. There were dozens, if not hundreds of letters among the early churches, dozens, if not hundreds of other Gospels giving account of the life and ministry, and the meaning of Jesus of Nazareth that did not, for whatever reason, meet the approval of the church hierarchy. Most scholars agree that the bible as we know it wasn't compiled until the late fourth to fifth century C.E. For the first four centuries of Christianity, the beliefs and practices were polyphonic.... Many voices, many interpretations. The early doctrines of the church were the syncretizations of ancient belief systems coalescing around the person of Jesus: Ancient Judaism, the Egyptian cult of Isis, Greek theology, Zoroastrianism, to name only a few of many. Religion evolves. It is never brand new. It is always a flowing together of tradition, cultural context, and new experience. Always evolving. It was not until Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire that the bible was codified and became the official texts of Christianity. Even today, there are still arguments among publishers and

scholars as to whether certain books belong in the regular canon, or in the apocrypha. Does the Apocrypha belong in the back of the book; or does it belong among the canonical texts? That's still an argument.

The Gospel of John from which we are now reading was the very last book to be included in the canon of scripture. It was very different from the other New Testament gospels and letters which drew chiefly from the tradition of Judaism. John, as I've said before, owes its ethos to Platonic thought and Greek philosophical categories. The other Gospels were rooted in Semitic culture. There were two serious controversies regarding this, the fourth gospel, which almost kept it out of the bible: First, John was considered docetic; that is, that this gospel placed more emphasis on Jesus's divinity than on his humanity. That was no small controversy. The Synoptic Gospels, by contrast, never claimed that Jesus was one and the same as God. Matthew, Mark, and Luke were at their heart reinterpretations of Torah, whereas John was a cosmopolitan interpretation as to the universal significance of Jesus. Claiming Jesus as divine just wasn't Kosher for these Semitic scribes. And then the second problem: This gospel was considered by many to be gnostic. Gnosticism was in the air in the early centuries of the Common Era. It was considered extreme by many. Cult-like. It was often esoteric and exclusive, claiming secret knowledge; and it was highly dualistic, believing that the world was sharply and irretrievably divided between good and evil. I suspect that the Gnostics had no small influence on Augustine of Hippo's developing the doctrine of original sin.

Suffice it to say, both of those two controversial observations are true of John's Gospel to one extent or another. I'm convinced that John got included in the canon because it was highly marketable, borrowing from the popular religious ethos of the age; by its alluring use of the sophisticated, if not authoritative, language of the Greek philosophical Academy. It had institutional credibility, in short.

The point I want to make here, is that there are varied and often contradictory points of view in the bible, even contradictory points of view among the Gospels. There is no single and consistent point of view or a singular narrative when it comes to the person of Jesus. That's why we have to engage scripture critically and imaginatively, recognizing that God is still revealing Godself for those open to the truth; that the story of Jesus is still evolving, contingent upon study, experience; owing to ancient, as well as modern context.... And not least, the applied imagination. Theology is not written in stone. It is an unending process of discovery. The differing points of view of scripture are meant to draw us in to that process. Scripture is not about dogma... but discovery.

Our reading for this morning is a good example of John's diverging perspective. In the Synoptic Gospel's, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus is hammering home the point that to love God is to in fact love one's neighbor, in particular, the poor, the shamed, the untouchable, the stranger. Here in John, Jesus is telling his disciples to love one another. He's not speaking of the proverbial neighbor. He's speaking of his

own community. In the text for today, Jesus has just named his betrayer. He and his disciples have just been given up to the police.... There is a crisis at hand... and then he says to his friends who must have been terrified... “Love one another,” take care of each other, lay down your lives for each other. I believe this teaching in John is meant for the church, and by church I mean all people of faith, and by people of faith I mean all who seek to serve the truth; all people of conscience who serve the greater good. This is an admonition to solidarity among those who serve the truth. When the crisis comes, we love our people. Perhaps John is speaking about being, more than doing. In apocalyptic times, we are to *be*... we are to be the embodiment of Love.

John uses the dualistic language of the Gnostics to describe the spiritual landscape of humanity: He calls the ones of faith, the ones of the truth, children of light.... As opposed to those who willfully stand against the truth whom he calls the children of darkness. Now it makes me a little uncomfortable to use this “us and them” language. After all, aren’t we all supposed to get along? Doesn’t God love everybody? Isn’t the church a big tent that welcomes all points of view? What do we make of John’s observation that there are adherents to truth, and adherents to falsehood; and that we must first love our fellow pilgrims of the faith. This sounds as if John is presenting the faithful as an exclusive community, caught up in itself. Raymond Pickett, a formidable scholar on the fourth gospel calls the faithful in John “a colony of angels.” I’ve heard many sermons on this text where the preacher

simply says this is one more admonition to love our neighbor, consistent with the teachings of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels. But that is not the case. Not that John wouldn't agree, but this is a call for the faithful to have love for one another. And John repeats this admonition throughout this gospel. So I think we have to give John his due, a different point of view.... Jesus tells his disciples that to Love him is to believe in him. The word for belief also means trust. Trust him. Trust each other. Trusting each other is trusting him.

Brothers and sisters, the world is falling apart all around us, and what shall we do? We are to believe in each other. To live up and against a world gone wrong... up and against the catastrophe happening in our very democracy; the dark rebirth of racism; the unbridled arrogance and greed of capitalism.... The first step for those of us faithful, is to love each other, to believe in each other, to trust each other, in the belief that Love is contagious. In short, Love is our witness to a broken world. What shall we ever do, we cry? In the face of our crumbling idols, what shall we do? Love one another; believe in one another; trust one another.

So here's what I've been thinking all week.... We people of faith, you and me and others in and outside our doors... all those of us who seek to serve the truth... we have to stick together; solidarity is vital to the church's mission... and not just stick together, but support and take care of each other. We have to speak out for each other, stand up for each other; we are to be staunch allies, ardent advocates.... We

are to love our people. John uses the word Love, befriending, which requires that we lay down our lives for each other; that is what faith requires.... A big ask, to be sure. And faith is manifest, not in a person, but in people. It is not enough to say, I have faith.... It is about the we.... We have faith... and that is more than enough. This is an affirmation that faith lives and moves in community... and we also have to recognize that indeed there are those who oppose us and the Gospel that we serve. The church, dare I say, is not for everyone. (sorry, bishops!) It is a tent growing smaller and smaller. It is for those who have committed their lives to the truth.

The Gospel of John was written in a time when Christian communities were being rooted out by the imperial powers. The Jesus movement was upsetting the status quo, calling out the sin of empire. These communities advocated for equality and dignity and justice up and against the elitism of a rigid class system that favored the rich and the powerful. Many died for the cause. It was risky business. We too live in dangerous times, becoming more dangerous as we speak... a time in which the rule of law is being compromised; a time in which the rich are getting richer while a growing and sizable percentage of us don't make a living wage. Our very democracy is under siege unlike any other time in our history. A good forty percent of the population of the United States has chosen to embrace a doctrine of cruelty towards those who are not white. This is not a mere matter of opinion. This is about darkness and light... and choosing between the two. Those of us who are on the side of truth,

now more than ever have to stick together; stand up for each other, speak out for each other. Love each other. We stand against the Lie. Small but mighty.

And what is the truth we serve? Jesus, and others before and after him have taught us, as if we didn't know it to begin with. We are, I believe, made with the capacity to know truth when we see it.... We are to live lives of empathy. We are to raise up the poor and the brokenhearted; we are to heal the sick; we are to bring freedom to the captives; we are to liberate the oppressed; we are to advocate for a just social order, a community of equals; we are to welcome and care for the immigrant. And we do this as a community that has love for each other, because it is love that will take us into the streets to lay down our lives for God's dream for the world. The times, brothers and sisters, demand our voices, our souls and bodies, our presence. There is no better argument for the need for the church than now. And the times demand that there is no forbearance for the lies that infect our common life. This perhaps is the church's finest hour. But not all are with us in this, so we have to have each other's backs. As long as there is love among us, we will persist. As long as there is love, there is hope. As long as there is love God is glorified even in the midst of betrayal. The ordeal is ahead of us, good people, but we are empowered with the love of God, manifest in our love for each other. Love your people; hold on to them; and by the grace of God, may love win.