

Homily for December 14th 2017

St. John is a saint because his life was a heroic effort to live up to his name: “of the Cross.” The folly of the cross came to full realization in time. Jesus’ words in Mark 8:34 “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me” is the story of John’s life. The Paschal Mystery—through death to life—strongly marks John as reformer, mystic-poet, and theologian-priest.

Today’s Collect captures St. John’s life well as we prayed:

*O God,
who gave the Priest Saint John
an outstanding dedication
to perfect self-denial and love of the Cross,*

Ordained a Carmelite priest in 1567 at age 25, John met Teresa of Avila and became her spiritual director. Like her he vowed himself to the primitive Rule of the Carmelites. As partner with Teresa and in his own right, John engaged in the work of reform, and came to experience the price of reform: increasing opposition, misunderstanding, persecution, imprisonment by fellow Carmelites in what were deplorable conditions. He came to know the cross acutely—to experience the dying of Jesus—as he sat month after month in his dark, damp, narrow cell with only his God.

Yet, the paradox! In this dying of imprisonment John came to life, uttering poetry. In the darkness of the dungeon, John’s spirit came into the Light. In his prison he came to express through the cross the ecstasy of mystical union with God. There he discovered the meaning of Isaiah’s beautiful poetry that we just heard read:

*When the poor and needy seek water,
and there is none,
and their tongue is parched with thirst,
I the LORD will answer them,
I the God of Israel will not forsake them.
¹⁸ I will open rivers on the bare heights,
and fountains in the midst of the valleys;
I will make the wilderness a pool of water,
and the dry land springs of water.
¹⁹ I will put in the wilderness the cedar,
the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive;
I will set in the desert the cypress,
the plane and the pine together;*

There is that cell, rivers of life opened in his soul because he realized the way of total abandonment to God. This abandonment is captured in the last stanza of his famous poem *The Dark Night of the Soul*:

*I abandoned and forgot myself,
laying my face on my Beloved;
all things ceased; I went out from myself,
leaving my cares
forgotten among the lilies.*

This theme governed St. John's Life. He went out from himself and gave his life completely to Jesus.

Our reading from Isaiah is a text so fitting to describe St. John's spiritual life. He came to see his life as only having significance because of who he was in Christ. Without Jesus he was the worm of Isaiah. But because of Jesus he could know:

*For I, the LORD your God,
hold your right hand;
it is I who say to you, "Fear not,
I will help you."*

Throughout his life he knew the saving help of Christ and so discovered the way to freedom as he journeyed through the desert of this present world.

Uniquely and strongly John underlines the gospel paradox: The cross leads to resurrection, agony to ecstasy, darkness to light, abandonment to possession, denial to self to union with God. If you want to save your life, you must lose it. John is truly "of the Cross." He stated this so clearly when in one of his spiritual canticles he counseled:

Would that men might come at last to see that it is quite impossible to reach the thicket of the riches and wisdom of God except by first entering the thicket of much suffering, in such a way that the soul finds there its consolation and desire. The soul that longs for divine wisdom chooses first, and in truth, to enter the thicket of the cross.

He died at 49—a life short, but full.

In his life and writings, John of the Cross has a crucial word for us today. We tend to be rich, soft, comfortable. We shrink even from words like *self-denial, mortification, purification, asceticism, discipline*. We run from the cross. John's message—like the gospel—is loud and clear: Don't—if you really want to live!

Today's Collect stated this application for our lives when we prayed:

*grant that, by imitating him closely at all times,
we may come to contemplate eternally your glory.*