

Psalm 66 1 John 5:4-12 St. John 20:19-23

Faith in the Historical and Biblical Jesus

What does one do with difficult biblical passages? Usually the temptation to ignore them or skip over them wins the day and so certain portions of the Bible are never expounded from the pulpit. The reasons for this are manifold...for one, the preacher does not want to display his own ignorance before his congregation for fear that they might move from thinking that he doesn't know everything to knowing that he doesn't know everything. Then there is also the possibility that the preacher is afraid he may muddy up the waters to such an extent that his congregation leaves the service more confused than before. But more often than not, it is simply a matter of time...trying to explain something that really demands an exposition of the whole biblical drama from start to finish in twenty odd minutes is a feat even the best of us find hard to accomplish. Most First Century readers would have been fairly well acquainted with the Old Testament and would have immediately picked up on references to biblical imagery in the New Testament Epistles...but we simply can no longer take such a general biblical knowledge for granted.

But to dodge difficult readings for any reason is wrong in my humble opinion. In fact, I felt so strongly about this during my first seminary training in the Church of England that when Dr. Craig Bartholomew made an off the cuff remark regarding the fact that he had never heard anyone preach on the exceptionally difficult passage in Numbers 5 concerning the manner in which Old Testament priests were to determine the guilt of unfaithful wives by making her drink the waters of bitterness (which really was just holy water mixed with dirt from the Tabernacle floor), I promptly wrote a long expository

sermon on it and delivered it to a rather bewildered group of parishioners at a Sunday night service. Amazingly, they invited me back to preach again. In the light of that passage, our Epistle lesson for this first Sunday after Easter seems a breeze...but this is still a rather complicated passage so please put on your thinking caps and gird your loins as we take a dive into the deep end.

Unlike most of the other New Testament authors, St. John writes in a mystical style, oftentimes using images and metaphors rather than a simple narrative or apologetic. For instance, in his first Epistle, he speaks of God as love, as light and as life...and often, to the modern ear, his manner of writing seems akin to riddles. So, when we read his writings we ought to read them somewhat as we would read poetry, very aware of the fact that there will be certain literary styles that go beyond simple straightforward reading and interpretation.

The portion of chapter five we just read from is no exception. St. John tells us that it is our faith that overcomes the world. Here the word “world” is in itself a metaphor for all that is not of God, including those parts within us that remain unchanged or untouched by the Gospel. But the word “faith” is very specific in St. John’s mind...it is faith in a very particular Person. I have often wondered what people really mean when they say they believe in Jesus...I can’t help wondering if they really know Who Jesus is. Do they believe in the biblical Jesus...or do they believe in a popular Jesus or a cultural Jesus? Is it the real Jesus they believe in? And apparently St. John wondered the same thing and so he carefully spelled out Who it was that this faith that overcame the world was based on.

You must remember that faith in Jesus was every bit as difficult for people in the First Century as it is for people in the Twenty-first Century. This Jesus was born in an obscure

town and was a member of a despised country and race. He was from Nazareth, a town never mentioned in the Old Testament in reference to the much-awaited Messiah...besides, it was situated in Galilee of the Gentiles. And everyone knew that no prophet ever came from Galilee. This same Jesus also died the death of the worst and most degraded malefactor, accused and condemned for blasphemy. It was faith in *this* Man that the Apostles called for...a Man Who was not attractive by anyone's definition...as the prophet Isaiah put it, "He has no form or comeliness; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him." And yet, the New Testament authors claim that He was the Son of God in an absolute and unique way, St. John presents Him to us as the Father's only begotten Son, begotten of His Father before all the ages, Who came and "Tabernacled" in our midst to redeem us by His Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension.

Now, it is the manner in which St. John describes these historical events that is often found perplexing to us. Look at verses 6-8 (and by the way, I am going to simply leave out the disputed words here without explanation because to do so will take too much time and lead us down a rabbit trail – let it suffice to say that the reference to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit is not found in any respected Greek text...this is first found in a Latin composition by a 4th Century Spanish Christian and then later translated into Greek sometime after the 14th Century, so they are generally regarded as non inspired insertions). "This is *He* (so the Apostle is about to narrow our focus here regarding *Who* exactly this Jesus is Whom he is speaking about in the preceding verse 5) Who came by water and blood – Jesus Christ; not only by water, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit Who bears witness, because the Spirit is truth. For there are three that bear

witness: the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree as one.” As clear as mud, right? What does St. John mean by water and blood and the Spirit as witnesses?

Most expositors look to the word translated ‘came’ for help. What did the Apostle mean by “He Who came” (by water and blood)...? The word must surely refer to something more than the Incarnation. Most see it as referring to circumstances and events through which Jesus came to humankind as a Savior...that in order for Him to save His people from their sins, He had to fulfill certain criteria, as it were. The first has to do with water. Now, for those of you who are more or less familiar with St. John’s Gospel, you would know that the fact that Jesus was the Messiah was made manifest to St. John the Baptist at Jesus’ baptism. The Baptist testified that God told him that upon whom he saw the Spirit descend and remain on Him, this was the Messiah...the One Who would baptize with the Holy Spirit...the Lamb of God Who had come to take away the sins of the world. So, He ‘came’ or was made manifested to us through the waters of St. John the Baptist’s baptism.

There are some who believe that this baptism was actually a rite in which Jesus (who was not of the priestly line) was baptized into the priesthood by St. John who was a priest – and therefore was enabled as a Priest to offer a sacrifice – in this case Himself as the spotless Lamb of God Who had come to take away the sins of the world. But that is awfully complicated to explain, so we will simply move on.

The second witness, according to St. John, was blood. Now, remember, of all the male disciples, St. John the Apostle was the only one present at the actual crucifixion. He is also the only one to mention in his Gospel the fact that when the soldier pierced Jesus’ side, blood and water came out. Then he added in the next sentence, “And he who has

seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows he is telling the truth, so that you may believe.” And then he went on to say that this happened so that a certain Messianic prophecy would be fulfilled. Now, unfortunately, to understand the significance of this particular prophecy one would have to look at the whole thing and that will take far too long, but let it suffice to say that this prophecy has to do with someone whom they pierced...and, indeed, beheld as pierced...they saw Him pierced. St. John, no doubt knew this prophecy and recalled it when he saw the water and the blood flow out of Jesus’ pierced side and consequently applied it to the Lord as a witness to His being the Messiah. You see, for St. John the water and the blood were witnesses he appealed to to prove what his readers ought to believe about Jesus...that Jesus was the Lamb of God Who had come to take away the sin of the world and that as that Lamb He really died and this death fulfilled Scripture. This would counter any heretical argument pitted against the orthodox understanding that Jesus was at once both God and Man...that the One Who died on the cross was the same One who was made manifest at His baptism. That by water He was identified as the Savior and by blood He fulfilled this task as the Savior...

And then there is this final witness...the witness of the Holy Spirit. It is interesting to note that St. John changes the tense here from the past to the present. When speaking about Jesus he said that He *came* (past tense) by water and blood, but now he says that it is the Spirit Who *bears witness* (present tense). Now, I believe that he is telling us that the past historical events have to be applied in space and time in order for the witness to be effective throughout the ages. *In other words, it is the Holy Spirit’s work to witness in our hearts to the truth concerning the historical and biblical Jesus and as such His*

present witness will never contradict the past events. (Did you get that?) *This* is what St. John means by saying that these three will always agree. Those who respond to this witness are then ‘born of God’ – reborn or regenerated – through the same Spirit Who came upon Jesus at His baptism and Who raised Jesus from the dead. Therefore, those who believe in this biblical and historical Jesus are the only ones who actually have eternal life. Belief in any other Jesus – a Jesus manufactured by a society or by a popular culture – is meaningless and of no eternal value at all...

This is what St. John means by “our faith”...a faith that conquers every element of the ‘world’ as that which is defined as self-absorbed. This faith conquers the ‘world’ because it turns the wisdom of the world upside down...it declares that the ‘world’ is insufficient in that it cannot rescue one soul from sin. It declares that the ‘world’ is foolish as it cannot comprehend the power of God made manifest in the weakness of the cross. This faith conquers the ‘world’ in that it defeats that which holds sway over the ‘world’, namely sin, the devil and death.

Now, it would be remiss of me if I did not mention that many commentators from the earliest times see in this passage a reference to the two Dominical Sacraments, namely Baptism and the Eucharist, or water and blood. Some also say that the traditional mingling of water with the wine during the offertory finds its genesis in this verse.

However, whether you agree with them or not, the fact is that in the Sacrament of the Eucharist the Holy Spirit does indeed witness to the historical events of Jesus death on our behalf as our Savior or Messiah. Here at our Lord’s Table the Holy Spirit witnesses to us in the present and confirms that what we believe about the historical and biblical Jesus is true because He is the Spirit of truth. Here He assures us that our faith is no

fanatical delusion...it is no wishful speculation...it is no product of our wild imagination. Here He once more testifies in our hearts and spirits that our faith is firmly founded upon the historical witness of God Himself through the life and death of the God-Man Jesus...a Man made manifest to us through the real historical events of His crucifixion, His death, His burial, and His resurrection...

So as you come to partake of the symbols that portray these events, as the Holy Spirit, not only to witness the truth to you concerning the biblical and historical Jesus, but also to continue to help you in your life's journey as you press on towards getting to know this biblical and historical Jesus better and better day by day...

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