

Sermon – 10/06/2007 pm

A True Witness

Study Text: John 21:24-25

The other day I spent a considerable amount of time putting my signature on a pile of letters. I hope I did not miss any as I turned the pages. What if I did miss one? The person receiving it might not accept it as a letter from me. Without a signature they might say this is not authentic. Although a signature is important on a letter there are other ways of verifying the author of a letter. Experts can look at the use of words and phrases. They look for indicators in the text itself which point to the writer of the letter.

Some might be convinced of the authenticity of the gospels if they had a personally signed copy, but even then sceptics would say it is a forgery. Sceptics like Richard Dawkins call these gospels the scribbling of some old men. But in the absence of a personal signature we have the next best thing with personal comments in the text itself pointing to authorship. We find this especially in the gospel according to Luke and the gospel according to John. *This is the disciple who testifies to these things and wrote these things* (21:24) (ultimately we know that it is the word of God for it speaks to our hearts, but sceptics do not accept this).

Witness

This gospel of John was most likely the last of the four to be written – somewhere between AD 80 and 90. The use of the word ‘brethren’ in verse 23 and the details of the saying circulating among them points to a more established church. There is evidence that some false teachings were emerging within the church by the time this gospel was written, especially teaching related to the divinity of Christ.

The Jews never accepted Jesus’ claim to be sent from God and to be equal with God (5:18). They may we have sought to impose their teaching within the early church. This gospel begins like this – *in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God* (1:1). In this opening chapter the word witness/testimony is used seven times. John the Baptist bore witness to Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (1:29).

Now here in the closing verses of this gospel, we find this word ‘witness’ prominent again – *this disciple testifies/‘bears witness’ of these things...and we know that his witness is true.* And then in his first letter John writes *we have seen and bear witness and declare to you that eternal life that was with the Father* (I John 1:2). In Revelation John says he was on the Island of Patmos because of the testimony/witness of the Jesus Christ (Revelation 1:9).

In this gospel the witness is not clearly identified, but definite clues are given. *This is the disciple who testifies of these things* (21:24). The witness was a disciple of Jesus. Which disciple? We must go to the previous where this disciple is the one about whom a rumour was circulating in the church. Who was this disciple? He was the one Peter spoke to Jesus about because he was following them.

This disciple is further identified in verse 20 as the disciple whom Jesus loved, the one who leaned on Jesus at the supper and asked about his betrayer. We wondered why this intimate detail was given here in verse 20 and now we know. This disciple who testifies and who wrote this gospel is the disciple whom Jesus loved who is understood to be John Zebedee. John is the only disciple who fits this description – John is never mentioned by name in this gospel.

This gospel then is a personal witness; it is the testimony of a man who lived with Jesus, who saw him die and saw him in his resurrection. *We have heard, we have seen with our eyes, we have looked upon and our hands have touched* (I John 1:1). Anyone reading this gospel with an open mind must accept it as personal testimony, rather than a late compilation by men seeking to support their own traditions. Whether they believe what is written or not is another matter, but the authenticity of this book is beyond question according to normal rules of verification of historical documents.

Writer

We know that his testimony is true (21:24). This disciple who witnessed these things and wrote them, now assures us that his testimony is true. What are we to make of the plural ‘we’ in this phrase? Was he including others in this word of assurance? Scholars cannot agree on who the ‘we’ refers to. Some argue from this ‘we’ that others apart from John were involved in writing this last chapter, or even the whole gospel. Some think he was referring to elders in the church at Ephesus when he was writing this gospel. This is possible but did an apostle of Jesus Christ need testimonial support from elders in the church?

In the prologue is a similar use of the plural – *we have seen his glory* (1:14). This use of ‘we’ must impact on what is found here in 21:24. Not just the last chapter but the whole gospel must be seen as a combined effort...or it may be simply an editorial ‘we’, or the ‘royal plural’ if you like. John does this all the time in his letters.

It is not at all unusual for a teacher to speak or write in this way. *We know that his testimony is true* is probably nothing more the writer including his readers in what he is declaring. After all this gospel was written *that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name* (20:31).

Are you thankful to have in your hands a record of the life and works of Jesus Christ from the pen of one of his disciples, indeed the disciple whom Jesus loved? In his providence God has preserved this personal testimony of the apostle John for you to read, and for you and anyone who reads it to gain eternal life by believing in this Jesus who is the Christ the Son of God.

Wonderful Jesus

What we have to read is only a fraction of all that Jesus said and did. Jesus never uttered an idle word. All he spoke was divine truth and worthy of recording. All Jesus did was in obedience to his heavenly Father. He never did any useless things. All he did was the work of God. John and the other gospel writers, who John may well have known about, recorded very few of the things that Jesus did.

John writes *there are also many other things which Jesus did which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written*

(21:25). He was not speaking in strict literal terms – he said *I suppose*. He was simply pointing out the great volume of the works of Jesus. He may even be reflecting on the works of Jesus in eternity for he began this gospel saying that *all things were made through him* (1:3).

John faithfully recorded what the Holy Spirit led him to write of the things which Jesus said and did. He did this for the benefit of all mankind. Note the focus on the whole world, the cosmos, here in this closing verse. This gospel is for all people, for all nations.

Matthew closed his gospel with the call to take the gospel to all nations, Mark with a command to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature, and Luke with the words to preach the gospel to all nations beginning at Jerusalem. It is fitting that John should also conclude with an indirect reference to the gospel going to the whole world or cosmos.

John wrote to glorify Jesus, not himself. This may be the reason he does not use his own name. Book shops today are filled with the life stories of men and women, many of whom have little claim to fame, and some of whom are actually infamous. People flock to buy such trash but turn their backs on the greatest biography in all history.

This gospel is not only biography of course, as John admits in this closing verse, but it is a true record of the works and words, the life of Jesus of Nazareth. John wrote with the intention that those who read would believe in Jesus. Indeed this writing has the power to change the life of those who read it. The word of God is living and powerful – this is the word of God.

What is written here is not all that Jesus said and did, but it is all sufficient for you to believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God. Do not listen to those who want to fill in any supposed gaps in this record, and do not pay heed to those who want to ‘get behind’ this simple straightforward record.

Men are digging around and looking all over the place in search of some thing to disprove what is written here, but they have not yet come up with anything – and never will. This record stands firm and many are coming to know Jesus as their Saviour and Lord through reading and hearing this gospel. Will you promise to put this glorious gospel in the hands of someone who is yet without life?

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