

The Apostle John is often known as the “beloved disciple”. Clearly, the evidence points to him being a close friend of Jesus Christ, and possibly the writer of five books of the New Testament. I say possibly, because no one can be certain. What is probable is that John was a fisherman who spent his time fishing on the sea of Galilee, along with other people who also became followers of Jesus. Three of these followers (Peter, James, and John) were with Jesus at the raising of Jairus' daughter from the dead, at the transfiguration, and in the garden of Gethsemane. Whilst he was dying on the Cross, we are told that, Jesus entrusted the care of his mother, Mary, to an unnamed disciple, tradition has it that this was John, who took her into his home (John 19:27).

John served the church in Jerusalem for many years, then moved to work in the church at Ephesus. There is a legend that John was taken to Rome during a persecution and thrown into boiling oil but emerged unhurt. It is generally agreed that John was later exiled to the island of Patmos where he possibly wrote the book of Revelation. He died in Ephesus around A.D. 98. One of the difficulties in looking at any character in the Bible is that there is a lack of clear historical information, and it is difficult to separate facts from what is often dearly held tradition.

One thing that is certain is that John's Gospel is strikingly different from the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Synoptic simply means "seen with the same eye" or from the same viewpoint. John's focus is to emphasise that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, sent by the Father to take away the sins of the world. He uses many symbolic titles for Jesus, such as the Lamb of God, resurrection, and the vine. Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus uses the phrase "I am," unmistakably identifying himself with Jehovah, the Great "I AM" or eternal God.

Our Gospel passage is familiar for most of us here today; it is often read at funerals and verse 2 is often quoted, usually from the King James Version: “In my Father's house there are many mansions.” In fact the more accurate translation is to exchange the word ‘mansions’ for the word ‘rooms’. Rivers of ink have flowed and hours of sermons preached about the various meanings of this particular verse. Undoubtedly there have been many discussions in Bible studies as well. So today, I am going to concentrate on a different aspect of this familiar passage. I am going to focus on the way and look at what the way might be.

Last year, my husband and I went for a walk around the village of Somerleyton in Suffolk where we keep our boat. It was a beautiful Autumn afternoon and we enjoyed the changing colours of the trees in the woods and the delights of a place we had not been to before. However, we soon came out of the woods and joined a main road. Looking at each other we realised that we did not have a map and neither of us had much of an idea where we were expect that we were beside a church. As fortune would have it a man was coming out of the churchyard so we asked him the way back to the village. Rather than giving us a set of complex directions, he said that he was going that way himself and we walked alongside him chatting about the usual mundane things that strangers usually chat about. All of a sudden the man stopped bent down and picked up a dead pigeon – I was horrified! Things got worse when he turned to us and said: “This is a nice one for my pot, it will go well with the mushrooms I have just collected from the churchyard.” I will never forget walking along the road with this man carrying a dead pigeon with its head bobbing up and down! I suppose it is the way of country folk and despite living in a semi-rural, we are still far removed from the way of real rural life.

Not only are we removed from the ways of rural life but we are even further removed from the lives and ways of the first followers of Jesus. It is difficult to see things through the eyes of those people who lived, worked and died over two thousand years ago. We can only speculate how they felt, what

they hoped for and what they expected Jesus to do for them. In the words of my Old Testament professor, the late Revd Professor John Gibson: "Jesus walked the dusty roads of Palestine, not the leafy lanes of England." We don't easily recognise after twenty centuries how radical and revolutionary Jesus and his teaching actually was. The people at the time were expecting a messiah, a king or ruler who would free them from Roman rule in order to impose God's rule upon the whole earth. What they got was someone entirely different; an unclean, trouble-making peasant who died a disgraceful cowardly death at the hands of Roman oppressors and Jewish authorities. The Romans knew only multi-coloured gods who supported a despotic earthly god in the form of the Emperor and the Jews knew only a strict, angry and judgemental God who enforced countless rules and regulations which must be obeyed to prevent misfortune occurring. They got this low-born foreigner who told them to love barbarians and outsiders as though they were family. Those early followers of Jesus must have felt lost and confused most of the time. The prevailing culture was one of power and wealth creation, obeying strict rules in order to avoid harsh punishments, both in this world and the next. In such a situation it wasn't difficult to feel lost. These first followers of Jesus were at the beginning of a journey. They did not have a map but only this man Jesus as a reference point for a radically new way of life.

In the 21st century we can look back and chart a history full of both self-sacrifice and cruelty, of burgeoning love and selfish ambition. We can learn lessons from history, but more often than not we don't. Only the other week I saw pictures of people gathering around St George's flags at a political meeting. That picture was not taken in the 1930's, that leader was not Franco, Mussolini or Hitler, or even Mosely and his black shirts. It was not a picture from our past but our present. It is an unfortunate image being played out in cities and towns around England. Indeed, we can see similar pictures with different flags in other cities around Europe and the United States as people gather around charismatic leaders whose message is one of hatred and suspicion of foreigners or minorities. We should look back and learn the warnings from history. I believe that as Christians we need to stand up against the rise of xenophobic and racist political parties and their leaders such as Tommy Robinson. A lesson from history is that Hitler was elected because many people did nothing. For Christians, doing nothing about the rise of racism and hatred is not an option. As our nation faces an uncertain future, we need to have a serious and grown up conversation in our church about our response.

Though we can look back, we can't go back. Ours is a one-way journey through time. Nevertheless, the air is thick with the cries of those who want to do just that. "Go back," they say. "Go back to the days when the faith was pure. Return to the Jesus of the Bible who is the True Way." Some of these people claim to have an infallible map which shows us the straight and narrow road to heaven. There is now a strong consensus that, contrary to their claims, our map is in fact rather like maps of the world made in the 14th century. The general outlines of the continents can be recognised. But critical details either aren't there at all, or the legend simply says, "Here be savages."

Since John wrote his Gospel map of Jesus as "The Way", at least two major things have changed. First, while the terrain of life is no more difficult, the potential penalties of taking a wrong path seem greater. How do we navigate the terrifying storms of nuclear war? What ethical mountains must be scaled if, as Christians we want to engage in sensible and logical debates about euthanasia or abortion? How do we respond to the changing nature of marriage, and gender identity? Advances in genetic engineering? People of other faiths and most people who have declare they have no faith? Where is the fertile land which will feed ten billion people? How will erratic and often meagre water supplies be justly shared out? What should a grown-up, informed and realistic Christian response be

to all these issues in the world today? We can't hide in our holy bunker and avoid the realities of the twenty first century.

Our Jesus map is in fact rather like maps of the world made in the 14th century. The general outlines of the continents can be recognised. But critical details either aren't there at all. To say glibly that "Jesus is the Way" simply doesn't wash for most people in the face of ethical, moral and personal issues. One test of this fact is that mass-produced "Jesus maps" handed out by churches are worth nothing in the market place of the 21st century. They can't even be given away and we must face this reality here in our church and in our Diocese.

Second, how we read maps today is different. We know more about the routes taken by travellers over the centuries than anyone ever has. Our maps of the past are more comprehensive than any before them. But it's clear that life remains as uncertain as it always has been and always will be. No map can tell us where we will go, but only where we might go if we choose to set out on a journey.

Jesus-maps used to be highly valued because they were thought to contain clear directions to the Golden City in the Kingdom of God. Very few people today are persuaded - or can be persuaded - that such maps are anything but fanciful. These people aren't completely correct, for the Jesus Map does contain some genuine geographical features. But those features are only broad guidelines to life's journey. The truth is that we are increasingly challenged to live life as we find it. The way can't be known in advance. We can refer to Jesus as "The Way" for a hint about this perilous mountain track and for some idea of that dangerous river crossing. But life will always be largely uncharted territory. The road is constantly changing. "The Way" has to be discovered and pioneered before it can be mapped.

And what we learn along the way is the art of travelling and mapping, not how to read ready-made maps. The challenge for us is to travel with people on their journey and to realise that Jesus is not a map but THE WAY to be discovered and explored.