

During the Season of the Resurrection and into the Season of the Glorious Cross, in the Divine Liturgy, the gospel reading will often come from the Gospel according to St. John. With this in mind, let us delve into this most unique of gospel accounts.

A quick perusal of this gospel reveals its uniqueness as compared to the other three gospels according to Sts. Matthew, Mark and Luke, often referred to as the “Synoptic” Gospels. In fact, John’s Gospel uses the eagle as its symbol to show how its theology literally “soars above” the other three. What the synoptic gospels consider important is elementary for John’s gospel or to put it another way, the synoptic gospels are the “a la carte” dinner while John’s is the full course banquet. In the traditional Roman Rite liturgy, Holy Mass always ends with the “Last Gospel” which is the Prologue or beginning of John’s Gospel. As a noted Catholic scripture scholar stated, “Without the Gospel according to St. John, we would have a very tame Christianity.”

John’s gospel contains no infancy stories of Our Lord’s birth and childhood. Instead, it opens with a mysterious Prologue, “In the beginning was the Word,”

which states belief in Our Lord’s divinity. While the Synoptic gospels all affirm Our Lord’s divinity, only John’s states His pre-existence as the second person of the Blessed Trinity with the Eternal Father

— the purpose of the Prologue. In the Synoptic gospels Our Lord spends most of His earthly ministry in Galilee and goes to Jerusalem only to undergo His Passion. In John’s Gospel, Our Lord spends the bulk of His ministry in Judea and Jerusalem and rarely goes to Galilee or Samaria. In the Synoptic Gospels Our Lord teaches with parables and speaks constantly about “The Kingdom of God (Heaven). Example: “The Kingdom of God is like a shepherd ...” While in John’s Gospel Our Lord doesn’t use parables and instead gives long discourses beginning with the phrase, “I am.” So here

Our Lord says, “I am the Good Shepherd...” The word “miracle” never occurs in John’s Gospel, but instead the word “sign” is used to show that it is not merely a physical event — a blind man recovering his sight, but a profound theological reality — the man not only gets his physical sight back, but his true sight by seeing Jesus as the Son of God. And lastly, there appears here that mysterious figure known only to

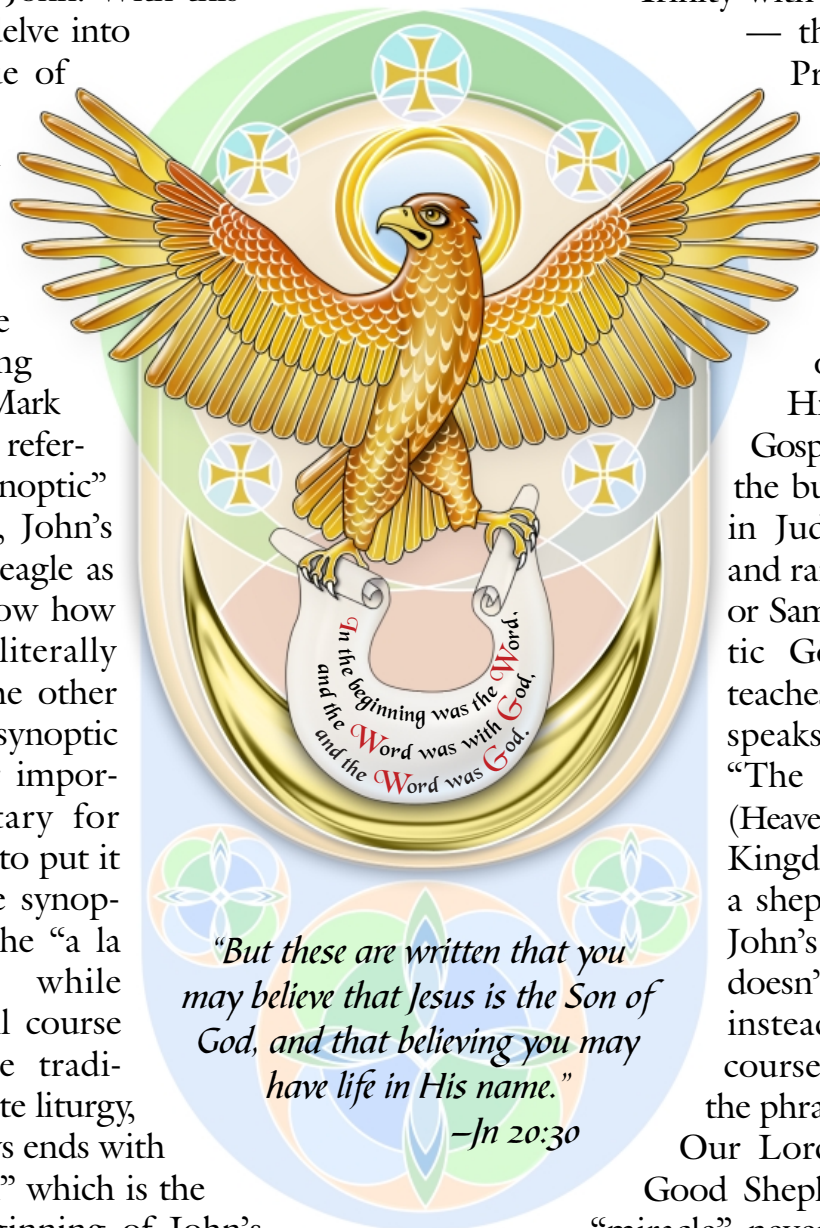


Illustration: Maronite Monks

this Gospel, “The Disciple whom Jesus loved” (the Beloved Disciple).

Tradition holds that this Beloved Disciple was John, son of Zebedee, who wrote this Gospel somewhere in the latter part of the 1st century A.D. This gospel, like the others, is based on eyewitness testimony. “He who saw it has borne witness — his testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth — that you also may believe.” (Jn. 19:35) The Church Fathers St. Irenaeus, St. Clement of Alexandria, St. Polycarp and the church historian Eusebius all testify to his authorship. The Beloved Disciple is the hero of this Gospel meaning that in him we see what a Christian disciple should be. Note the contrast of John with Simon Peter. At the Last Supper John reclines his head against Our Lord and Peter has to motion to him to ask Our Lord the identity of the traitor. After Our Lord’s arrest, John follows him into the courtyard of the high priest while Peter follows “at a distance.” John has to use his influence to get Peter into the courtyard. Peter then denies Our Lord and flees, while John remains. We find John at the foot of the cross with the Blessed Mother while Peter is nowhere to be seen. Our Lord then gives John, the disciple par excellence, to Mary as her son thus making Mary the Mother of the Church and therefore of all disciples. On Easter Sunday John and Peter both run to the empty tomb but John outruns Peter to arrive first. He defers to Peter’s position and lets him enter the tomb first. But we are told that John saw the wrappings and “believed.” Peter’s belief will come a little later. Finally, Peter gets rehabilitated when Our Lord asks him three times, “Do you love me?” John needs no rehabilitation since he has been faithful throughout. After all this you might wonder why Our Lord didn’t make John the “rock” of the Church instead of Peter. As



“Before the good news of our Savior announcing life to us all, let us offer this incense. O Lord we ask for your mercy.”

~the Maronite Divine Liturgy

the late Bishop Sheen would tell it, Our Lord chose weak Peter to give you and me faith in our weaknesses. While we should all strive for the faithfulness of the Beloved Disciple, we nevertheless fail many times. In our failures we can look to weak Simon Peter and know that despite his weakness Our Lord made him the Rock of the Church.

The message of this gospel can be summarized as follows. Jesus, who always existed with His Heavenly Father (Prologue), comes down from Heaven in the Incarnation to give us God’s life. He accomplishes this through His Passion, Death and Resurrection, and returns to where He has always been (with His Father — “The Father and I are one.”) How does one obtain this “life”? By believing in “He whom the Father sent.” By believing and by being “born from above in water and the spirit,” one receives this life of God. Notice that the more correct rendering of the Greek word is “from above” as opposed to “again.” This is not natural birth but supernatural birth

that comes “from above” in the same way Our Lord came “from above.” The reference to the sacrament of Baptism is unmistakable. In fact, one of the characteristics of this gospel is the rich sacramental theology contained in it. Being “born from above in water and the spirit is one event. There is no **separate** baptism in the spirit apart from water baptism. So when your friend asks you, “Are you born again?” you reply: “Yes, I am born from above the Bible way, by water and the spirit — the sacrament of baptism.”

Note the importance of the word “believe.” “He who believes in me has eternal life.” To believe in this gospel means to surrender oneself completely to the person of Jesus. A Catholic who picks and chooses what he will believe in fact **does not believe** according to this gospel.

One keeps this life of God by observing the commandments (“he who loves me will keep my commandments”), and nourishes this new life through the Eucharist (“unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood you have no life”). Through his “I am the bread of life” discourse, Jesus teaches us the great truth of his Eucharistic Real Presence—His Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity—in the doctrine known as Transubstantiation. John uses the Greek work, *sarx*, to indicate a real body. If Jesus was referring to a purely spiritual presence the Greek word, *soma*, would have been used. Also the Greek word for “eat” suggests “chewing” as when a dog chews a bone. This word also would be totally out of place were Jesus referring to a purely spiritual presence in the bread or saying that his teachings were “the bread of life.” Remember that the ancient Romans accused the Christians of “cannibalism”: hardly appropriate if it were

just a “spiritual” presence as the Romans themselves ate sacred food. With this teaching Our Lord loses the masses, “This teaching is too hard to accept. Who can endure it?” “And many of His disciples no longer walked with him.” Some things don’t change over the years.

The symbol of the Church in this gospel is “I am the vine, you are the branches.” It stresses personal attachment to the person of Jesus. Our faith is faith in a real person, the living Son of God.

In summary we can say that the purpose of this gospel is quite simple. Jesus, who always existed with His Heavenly Father, comes down to give us God’s life so that He can take us back to where He’s always been: “so that where I am, you also may be.” May our listening to and reading this gospel bring us the gift of God’s life. “And I will raise you up on the last day.” ✠