

Christmas I – Feast of St. John
Holy Trinity Church, Buffalo, NY
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ST. JOHN, Et. Al.

the days between Christmas Eve and New Year's Day are Many of designated as Holy Days. December 25 is the Nativity of our Lord. December 26 is St. Stephen's Day – the first Christian Martyr. December 27 is St. John's Day. December 28 is Holy Innocents' Day. And, January 1 is The Name of Jesus Day

Bach's **Christmas Oratorio** is made up of the music he composed to commemorate each of these days.

This year it happens that St. John's Day, December 27, falls on a Sunday, which it does every seven years or so – depending on leap years. The fact that it is also my birthday and that my name is John, is purely coincidental. My mother was pretty serious about her faith, but I think she knew from the beginning that I would not be up to having the name of a saint.

The problem with the feast of St. John is that we don't quite know who the John was who got credit for all those wonderful books in the New Testament. There is reference in the gospel to a disciple named John whom Jesus loved. According to tradition, it was this John who wrote the Gospel of John, and it was he who wrote the three Epistles of John.

But there is much speculation as to how accurate these attributions are. The Book of Revelation was written by John the Elder, whom no scholar considers to be the disciple John. And if he or she does, they are no scholar.

In case you are wondering how the name of John got attached to these writings, you have to know that in antiquity you had the reverse of what happens today. Today we have scandals relating to reporters, columnists and authors using other people's material and calling it their own – they plagiarize. In those old days it was different. In those days if you wanted something you wrote circulated, you claimed that it was written by someone important. And you put his name down as the author.

That still works to a certain degree. Somebody carried out a bit of embarrassing research in which he had a well-know writer submit items for publication under a false name. When he used this pseudonym, all of his material was rejected. He then resubmitted the material using his own name, and it was readily accepted.

Well, the scholarly way of handling the issue of authorship is to say that there was probably a Johanine school – or a group of men closely connected to John who wrote the material. This gives an aura of validity to the authorship – even if it does beg the question.

And we also have to remember that the reason the gospels of Matthew, Mark and John have been revered is because it was assumed that they were written by the disciples of Jesus. Luke, however, admits that what he had written about Jesus was the result of what he had heard and read. In the first few verses of Luke's gospel he wrote:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and minister of the word, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you. (Luke 1:1-3)

And at the end of his gospel John wrote:

...there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world could not contain the books that would be written. (21:25)

Which, of course, raises the question about the validity of other writings that tell about Jesus but which are not part of the kosher Bible. There were stories about Jesus that circulated for centuries, and there are also the writings that surfaced in Egypt not many ears ago.

So how do we know which of these writings concerning Jesus are valid? Well, it would seem that some are and some are not. Some are so fanciful that they are obviously not true. Stories about Jesus as a little boy playing with some other children and making birds out of clay and telling them to fly away – and they come alive and fly away. Medieval lore about Jesus got to be pretty bazaar. In one song from that period, Jesus gets annoyed with some children when they tease him, so he causes them all to fall into well where they drown.

On the other hand, some very provocative material from the first century has surfaced in Egypt which scholars find useful and informative.

So, the question is, “Do we know all there is to know about what Jesus said and did?” And the answer is obviously, “NO”.

But there is a second question, “Is what we do know, enough?” Do we need more writings from the past to fill in the gaps and to help explain things that are confusing? Well, I always liked what Mark Twain said about the good book – he said, **“It isn't the parts of the Bible that I don't understand that trouble me; it's the parts that I do understand.”**

The gospel stories may not be consistent in telling us about Jesus' last words from the cross. But the gospels are very consistent in telling us to be concerned for the poor, and the homeless, and the hungry, and for those who have none to care for them.

The gospel message is consistent when it tells us to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with God.

The story of Jesus in the Bible is well summed up by words from John's First Epistle:

Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God; for God is love...Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. (4:7,8,11,12)