



This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true.

John 21:24

The Beloved Disciple Concludes the Gospel

JOHN 21:20–25 ²⁰*Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; he was the one who had reclined next to Jesus at the supper and had said, “Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?”* ²¹*When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, “Lord, what about him?”* ²²*Jesus said to him, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!”* ²³*So the rumor spread in the community that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?”*

²⁴*This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true.* ²⁵*But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.*

The final words of the gospel spotlight the anonymous beloved disciple. Having just focused on the ministry and martyrdom of Peter, the gospel turns to the witness and destiny of the disciple Jesus

loved. It seems that while Jesus and Peter continue talking, the beloved disciple is within listening range. The gospel readers are reminded that he is the one who had leaned against the chest of Jesus at the supper, again emphasizing the closeness of this disciple to Jesus throughout his earthly ministry.

After Peter was commissioned to shepherd the community of Jesus and then told that he would be crucified in the path of following Jesus, Peter naturally asks about the beloved disciple: "Lord, what about him?" (verse 21). Would this disciple suffer a similar fate? Jesus replies, telling Peter that the fate of the beloved disciple is not his concern. Jesus does not see the need to compare the roles of these two disciples in the emerging church. Peter holds the place of leadership and primacy in the church; the beloved disciple holds a special place as founder of the community to which this gospel was written. Peter is called to a life of pastoral ministry, followed by martyrdom; the beloved disciple is called to live a long life of faithful witness, culminating in the written gospel itself. Both forms of discipleship are equally valid and important for the church. Essentially, Jesus is telling all disciples to be content with their own calling and to leave that of others to him.

This disciple Jesus loved must have been one of the last of the original disciples to die. His imminent death was probably the occasion for completing this gospel. This final piece of the epilogue is meant to clarify the words of Jesus about the destiny of the beloved disciple. Jesus did not say that the beloved disciple would not die, as it had apparently been rumored within the community. Jesus only said, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?" (verses 22–23). In other words, the future of each disciple is determined only by the will of Jesus and is not a matter of concern or rivalry among the other disciples.

The beloved disciple closes the gospel with a signature verse, verifying himself as eyewitness to the life of Jesus as well as author of the gospel (verse 24). The statement, "We know that his testimony is true," refers to the trust placed in this gospel by the community of the beloved disciple who first received this gospel and also later generations of readers who know that his witness is true and can give witness to their own belief. His testimony is "true" not only because of this disciple's presence during Jesus' life, but because his testimony concerns Jesus who is truth itself (14:6). It is "testi-

mony” not only because it comes from an eyewitness, but because the Spirit of truth testifies to Jesus (15:26).

Then, after confirming that he is the witness and author, the beloved disciple directs attention where it is due, to Jesus himself (verse 25). The author closes by stating that his own work is only a small fraction of all the honors due to Jesus Christ. Neither the testimony of the beloved disciple nor the words of the gospel are sufficient to contain the fullness of who Jesus is, the Word made flesh, who is forever the way, the truth, and the life.

Reflection and discussion

- What seems to be the main point of Jesus’ response to Peter’s questions (verses 21–22)? What similar advice might Jesus give to me?

- What seems to be the relationship between Jesus and the beloved disciple as revealed in this final scene?

- Why does Jesus give people different but complementary ministries in his church? What happens when we compare ourselves too closely with others?

- What does the final verse of the gospel tell the reader about the relationship between the life of Jesus and the written gospel?

- How has my study of John's gospel helped me to imitate the witness of the beloved disciple?

Prayer

Word made Flesh, you have revealed to me the love of the Father, and you invite me to share in that life forever. Help me to take to heart the words of this gospel so that I can witness that life and love always.