

We might expect Simon Peter to be the archetypal disciple in every way. In Mark's Gospel he is the first to receive the evangelical call "Follow Me!" and he is the first to respond, leaving everything behind for Jesus.

But the rôle of archetypal disciple is not on offer in the Fourth Gospel. It belongs to the man whose teaching and memories lie behind the Gospel, and at the foundation of the Church where it was put into sublime words: the one called "the Beloved Disciple", whose name is not known to us, and who is not identified by any other Gospel. We only know of his existence because of this Gospel, and we only hear of him or from him after the moment where Jesus washes the feet of his disciples. But he is no invention; his recollections are so realistic, his eyewitness account so vivid, that we are quite sure he is a real person, and he has left his mark on this Gospel of John which has been with us every day since the Easter Triduum.

So it is part of a pattern in the Fourth Gospel that words and deeds which are elsewhere gathered at the beginning of the Gospel here find their place at the end, and vice-versa. The miraculous draught of fish as at the beginning of Matthew, at the end of John; the cleansing of the Temple is the end of the ministry in the Synoptics, and the first great sign to Jerusalem in John.

We should note that there is much in John which is held back until the Paschal Mystery. The Cross and Resurrection are the real key to Jesus' life and ministry, and they make possible what is impossible before them. Peter's ministry is one of the things which cannot be understood until now; the feeding of the flock in love for Christ cannot take place while Peter's mind is unenlightened by the Easter message; nor can a man who has a secret sword hidden about him really follow Christ. Jesus knows that only the death of Peter stands between him and his discipleship. It is the same for us. Until our faith becomes fixed on the Kingdom of Heaven, we cannot be ministers of the Gospel; we are constantly divided in our mind, nourishing and guarding the gifts of this life, and therefore implicated in the devices and stratagems of the world.

Now that Peter has been, as it were, baptised by his swimming for the shore - now he has truly left his fishing-boat behind - now that he has been fed by the hand of his risen Master: now that he has been rehabilitated for his denials, his escape-route from the Cross - Jesus can issue to him the call to be a follower, to be a true disciple.

Lord, as I grow old, help me to stretch out my hands, and be taken to the path of life.