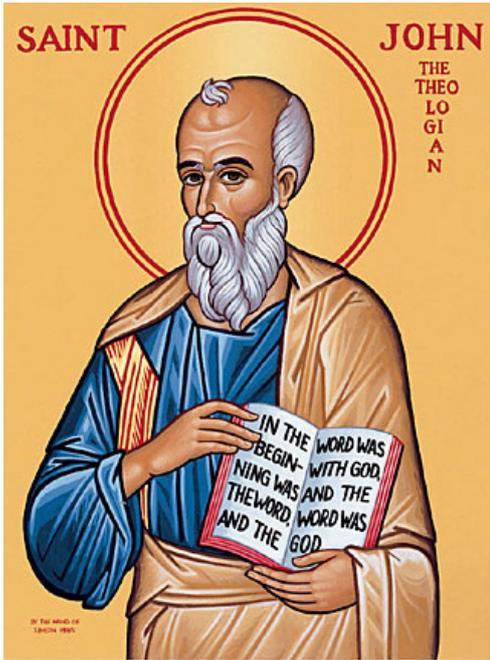


May: The Time of Easter



It is indeed the year of the Gospel of Matthew, but there has already been a long interruption for the final Sundays of Lent, and there will now be another interruption for the Season of Easter. Matthew comes into his own only for Ascension Day, the conclusion of the Gospel, when Jesus, on the holy mountain in Galilee, sends out his disciples. Sending them out to spread the Gospel and baptize, he speaks in the full authority of the Son of Man – and more, for he has been given all authority in heaven as well as on earth. Just as at the beginning of the Gospel he was named ‘Emmanuel. God with us’ so now he promises to be always with his Church. The presence of Christ in his Church brackets the Gospel. All but one of the other Sunday Gospel readings are from John. The emphasis is not on the mode of existence of the newly-risen Christ. Though his body is physical, it is no longer subject to the limitations of time and space so familiar to us.

When Paul in First Corinthians 15 discusses the risen body – and our risen bodies will be like his – he says it would be stupid to ask what sort of body it is. He says there is personal continuity, but ‘body’ is an analogical term, used differently of a heavenly body and the body of a fish or of a human being. The risen body is transformed or subsumed into the divine in several ways: from weakness to strength, from corruption to incorruption, from contemptible to glorious. Perhaps this is all summed up in the fourth way: the risen person is given life not by the ‘flesh’ but by the Spirit of God.

However, this is not the focus of the Easter Gospel readings; these focus on the presence of the Risen Christ in his Church. Others have claimed to be alive after being dead, but in no other case has the person claimed to be continuously present to his followers as a life-giving and guiding force. This is precisely what Jesus claims. On Good Shepherd Sunday (May 7th) he announces himself as the shepherd to whose voice the sheep respond and who gives his life for the sheep, and at the same time the door through which they go in and out to find pasture. On the two following Sundays, when John 14 is read (May 14th and 21st), the accent is slightly different, and more Trinitarian. Here Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and Life, going ahead and leading his followers to the Father. Jesus and the Father are one, each dwelling in the other. In the same way, Jesus and his followers dwell in one another, thus also forming a unity with the Father.

On the latter Sunday there is also the first of four promises of the Paraclete or Advocate. This is one of the many legal terms in the Gospel of John, a legal advocate, called to the side of someone in a lawsuit to help and represent that person. The Paraclete fulfills this function in both directions, making Jesus present when he is absent, and leading his followers into all truth, the completion of his message. The Paraclete stands at their side to comfort them when they are threatened or disheartened. The Paraclete is sent by the Father or from the Father, but also by the Son and through the Son, thus completing the circle of love. The Christian is never alone.