

17. EPILOGUE : John 21



Though this Epilogue was added to the already completed Gospel, it was always part of the Gospel which circulated in the early Christian communities. Its author was a member of the same community and its spirit and content are integrated beautifully with the spirit and themes of the rest of the Gospel. Its author felt free to make this addition, encouraged by John's own conclusion which acknowledged that 'Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples' (20:30). Here was one sign which the author of the Epilogue thought it important to include in the Gospel.

One reason for the addition was the death of the Beloved Disciple. We know from other writings of the New Testament that the resurrection of Jesus, the ‘first fruits of those who have died’ (1Corinthians 15:20), encouraged an expectation that the rest of the harvest would follow quickly. Many expected the imminent end of the world. The long life of the Beloved Disciple and the memory of a promise made to him by Jesus led his community to expect Jesus to come in glory while he was still alive. The death of the Beloved Disciple caused a crisis of faith for many. Some explanation was required.

There was also the danger that the community which had relied so heavily on the presence, witness and charismatic leadership of the Beloved Disciple could lose its way without him. While respecting the special characteristics of the community, the author of the Epilogue sensed the need to integrate it more fully into the life of the wider Church. Though Peter was no longer alive, having been crucified in Rome c.67AD, his pastoral role as leader of the disciples and as a symbol of their unity remained important. The author wished to reinforce this and to clarify the relationship between Peter and the Beloved Disciple. It was important that the community see itself as part of the wider 'catholic' community. Jesus prayed that his disciples would be one with him in the life of communion which he enjoyed with his Father. One fruit of this would be their communion with each other.

Both these issues are addressed here in the context of a the community's experience of the presence of Jesus among them after his death. We have already noted the tradition that Jesus revealed himself to his disciples at a meal (see John 20:19-29). There is also a tradition that Jesus revealed himself to Peter (see 1Corinthians 15:5, Luke 24:34 and Mark 16:7; also Luke 22:31-32). It is likely that elements of this encounter between Peter and the risen Jesus have been incorporated by Matthew into his portrayal of the scene at Caesarea Philippi (Matthew 16:18-19) and by Luke into his portrayal of the calling of Peter (Luke 5:1-11). What we have here in this Epilogue seems to be a composite of these two traditions: one focusing on a meal in which Jesus reveals himself to his disciples, the other centring on Peter which tells of a miraculous catch of fish, Peter's recognition of the risen Jesus and Jesus' commissioning Peter in his pastoral role as leader of the community.

John 21:1-6

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee (only time), and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, 'I am going fishing.' They said to him, 'We will go with you.' They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. (compare Luke 5:5; John 15:5: 'Apart from me you can do nothing').

Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, 'Children, you have no fish, have you?' They answered him, 'No.' He said to them, 'Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.' So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. (compare Luke 5:6-7)

John 21:7-11

That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!' ('I will reveal myself to the one who loves me' - John 14:21). When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he tucked his fisherman's smock (his only clothing) into his belt, and jumped into the sea. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about two hundred cubits (a hundred metres). When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there (18:18) with fish on it and bread. Jesus said to them, 'Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.' So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn.

John 21:12-14

Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast.' Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, 'Who are you?' because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time (20:19-23; 20:26-29) that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Once again we are reminded that seeing and recognising the risen Jesus is not a matter of physical sight. 'They knew it was the Lord' with a knowledge that transcends the physical. There are echoes here of the multiplication of bread and fish recorded in chapter six, with the same Eucharistic symbolism. We are reminded also of Luke's narrative of the disciples at Emmaus who recognised the risen Jesus 'in the breaking of the bread' (Luke 24:35).

John 21:15-17

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you love (ἀγαπάω) me more than these?’ (see John 13:37; Mark 14:29). He said to him, Lord; you know that I love (φιλέω) you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’ A second time he said to him, ‘Simon son of John, do you love (ἀγαπάω) me?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love (φιλέω) you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Shepherd my sheep.’ He said to him the third time, ‘Simon son of John, do you love (φιλέω) me?’ Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, ‘Do you love (φιλέω) me?’ And he said to him, ‘Lord, you know everything; you know that I love (φιλέω) you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my sheep.

(see Luke 22:32 ‘strengthen your brothers & Matthew 16:18 at Caesarea Philippi).

1 Peter 5:1-5

‘As an elder (πρεσβυτέρος) myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you to shepherd (ποιμαίνω) the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight (ἐπισκοπέω), not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it – not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away.’

John 21:18-19

Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.'(He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, 'Follow me.'

Jesus, the good shepherd laid down his life for his sheep (10:11,15). Now that Peter has learned humility and has experienced the healing power of Jesus' forgiveness, he is able to do what, in love but with presumption, he said he would do: 'I will lay down my life for you' (13:37). He was crucified in Rome during the persecution of the Roman Christians under Nero (c.67AD).

1 Peter 2:21

'To this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.'

John 21:20-24

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?’ When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, ‘Lord, what about him?’ Jesus said to him, ‘If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? **Follow me!**’ So the rumour 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?’ This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and **has written them**, and we know that his testimony is true.

Whether the Beloved Disciple actually wrote the gospel, or it is the memories, the preaching, teaching (and perhaps writing) of the Beloved Disciple that is the source of the tradition recorded in the Gospel, he can be called the author of the Gospel.

John 21:25

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.

Origen: Commentary on John 1.60

‘The things which are in him in whom “all the fullness of divinity was pleased to dwell bodily” (Colossians 1:19; 2:9) are by no means contained in writings.’

Augustine: Tractate 124.7

‘John does not drink alone from the fountain of the Lord’s breast ... The Lord himself according to each person’s capacity spreads his Gospel to be drunk by all in the whole world.’



John 1:1-2

‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was towards God,
[πρὸς τὸν θεόν]
and the Word was God [God’s, divine] [theos].

[= enjoys intimate communion with God]

The Word was towards God [πρὸς τὸν θεόν] in the beginning.

John 1:3

All things came into being through the Word,
and without the Word not one thing that was made came into being.



Michelangelo, The Creation of Adam, Sistine Chapel, Public Domain, Wikimedia Commons

John 1:4

In the Word was life, and the life was the light of all people.

John 1:5

The **light** shines in the darkness, but the darkness did not receive it
{καταλαμβάνω, verse 12)

John 1:9-13

The true **light**, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

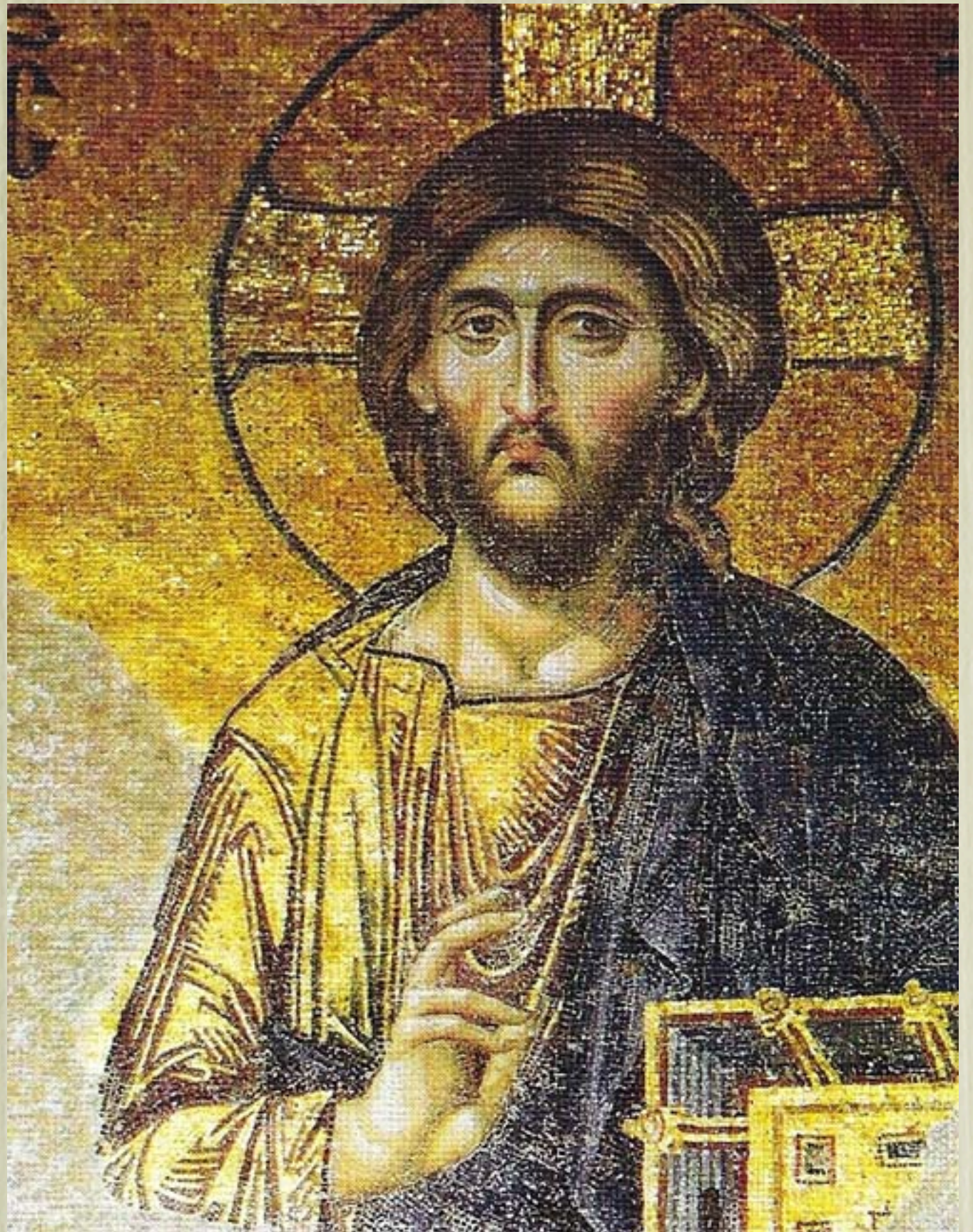
God's Word was in the world, and the world came into being through God's Word; yet the world did not know it.

God's Word came to what was God's own, and God's own people did not accept God's Word.

But to all who received the Word, who believed in the Word, the Word gave power to become children of God, who were born not of human generation [**'bloods'**] or of human striving [**'the will of the flesh'**] or of male power, but of God.

John 1:14

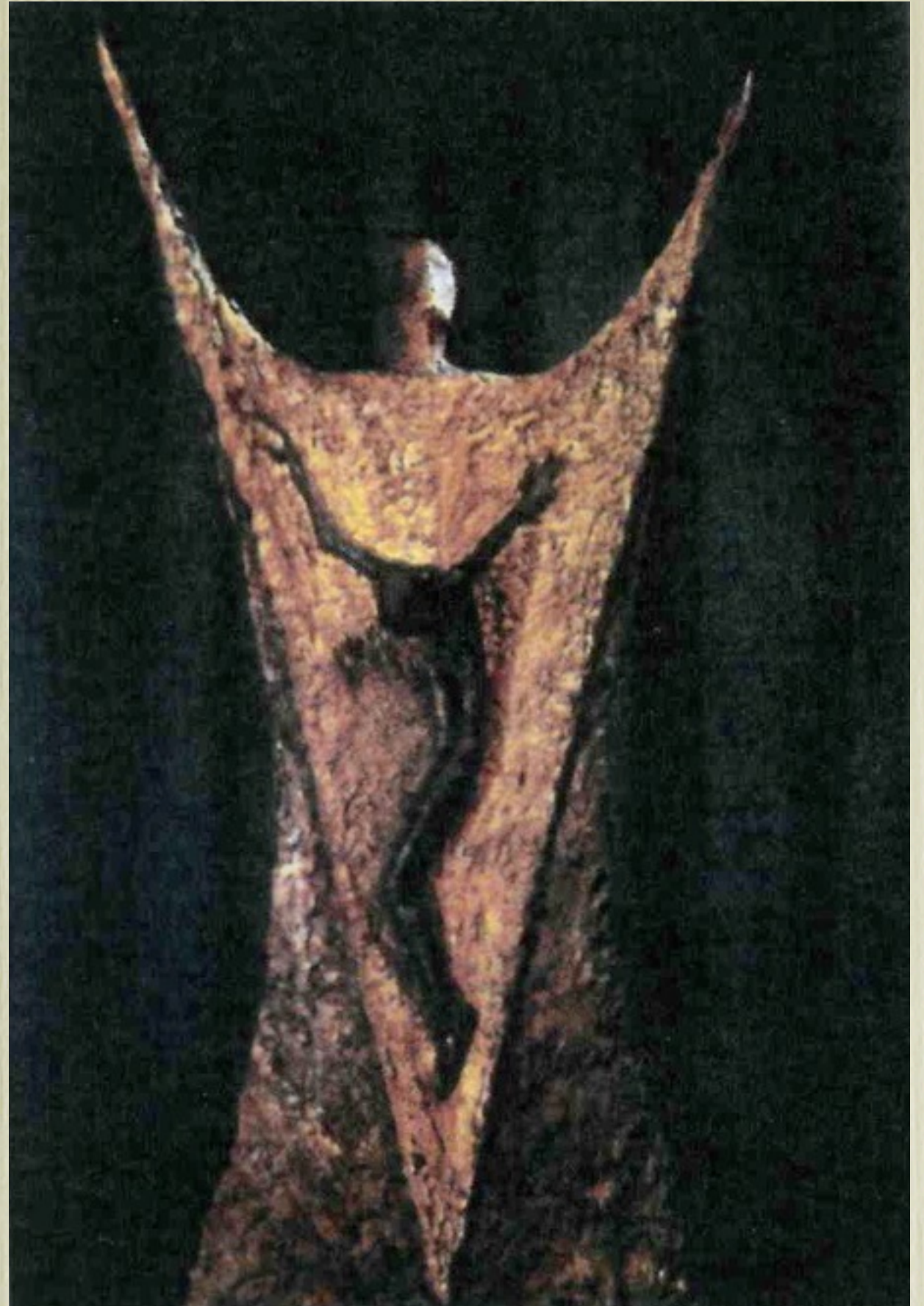
The Word became flesh
and lived among us



The Christ Pantokrator, 13th Century Deesis Mosaic in Hagia Sophia, Istanbul,
(Photo: Guillaume Piolle, public domain, from Wikimedia Commons)

John 1:14

and we have seen his glory,
the glory as of a father's
only son, full of the gift of
truth.



John 1:16

From his fullness we have all received,
grace upon grace.

‘The heart of God descends in haste
to his creation,
with the weight of an infinite love,
and the heart of creation rises towards God,
drawn by an attraction
that dominates all others in it.

It is in Jesus that these two hearts meet,
and they unite so profoundly
that the two hearts become one.’

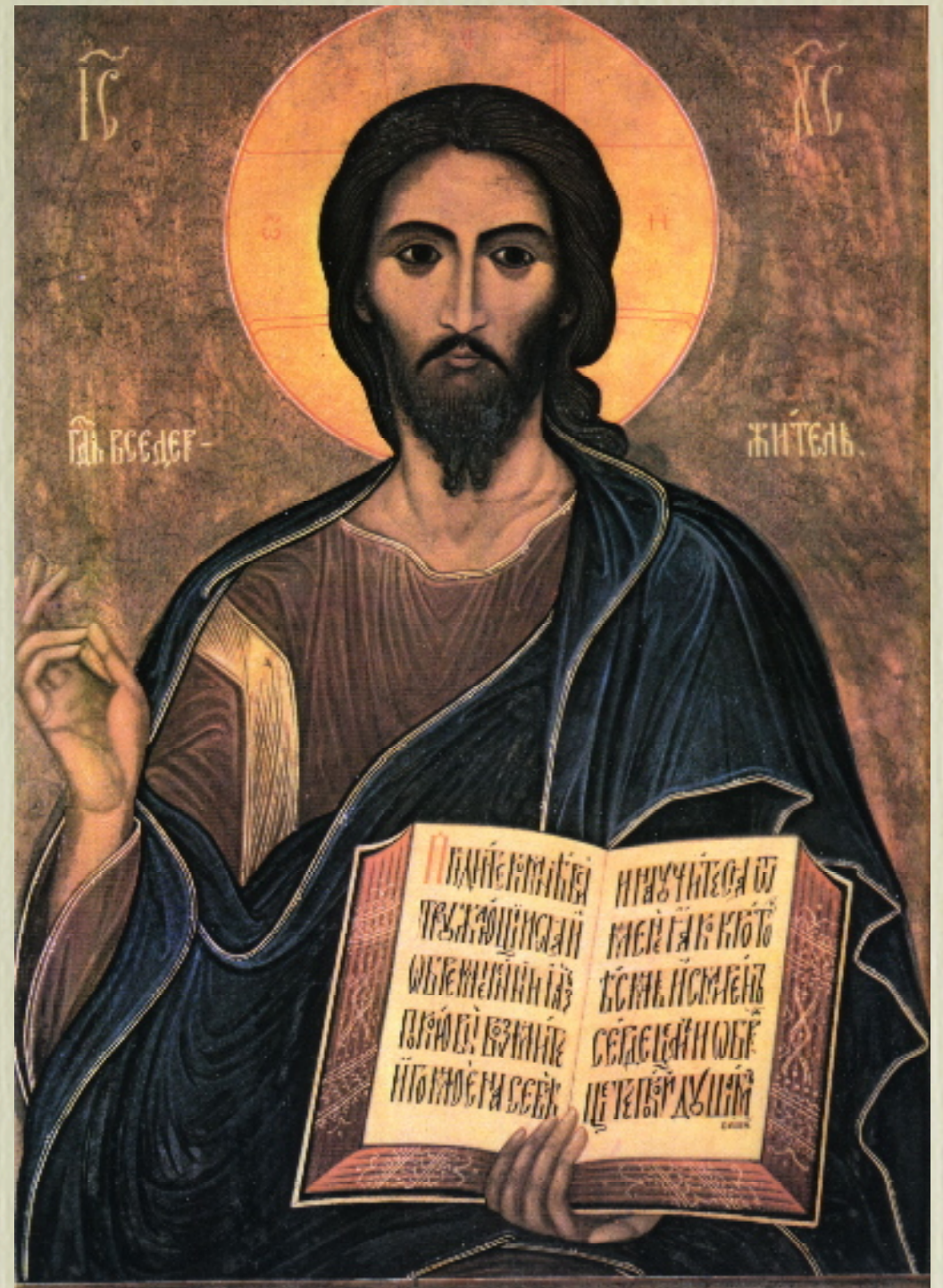
(Jules Chevalier, ‘The Heart of Jesus, page 76.



George Viredaz from an icon of Christ and Saint John
Dormition Abbey, Jerusalem. Used with permission.

John 1:17

‘The Law [Torah] indeed was given through Moses;
the gift of Truth came through Jesus the Messiah.’



John 1:18

‘No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, who has made God known.’



George Viredaz from an icon of Christ and Saint John
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