

John 1:6-8, 19-28 – Sermon for 10.30am

We've got to the third Sunday of Advent season in the run-up to Christmas and we find ourselves in our gospel reading, still talking about the enigmatic figure of John the Baptist. Who is he and what is he doing featuring so highly in our Christmas story? He doesn't get a look-in in our Nativity plays, and yet our Advent readings seem full of him. And what does it mean for us that this strangely dressed man with a really odd diet lived so long ago and took people and washed them in a river? It is all rather confusing, and not like our normal "Shepherds, angels, and wise men" type of Christmas story at all!

I'm going to suggest this morning that John performs a particular function at a particular time in history, but also that, especially at Advent, John provides us with the perfect role model in leading other people to ask the right questions at Christmas.

So, in our reading, the Jews sent a delegation from Jerusalem, having heard what was going on at the river to ask John who he was. There's an implicit question about whether John is the "Messiah". Now for those of you who are hazy on this "Messiah" terminology, the Messiah or "Christ" is the figure that the Jewish people were waiting for. The Messiah was the figure that God had promised to save his people from their oppression, to bring freedom, and to restore Israel in its relationship with God. There had been lots of false hopes shattered, and because of the politics of the time, there would have been a mixture of anticipation at God's Messiah coming to free the people from the Roman occupation they were suffering, but also anxiety at the effects of political rebellion if they followed another false Messiah. The Romans were not known to be lenient towards those who revolted. It was therefore really important to know who this man John was, and although the question we have is "Who are you?" clearly by John's response, it had cautious undertones of "Are you the Messiah we've been waiting for?"

John's response translates a bit clunkily from the Greek. Our pew bible says "He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah"." All this really means is that John was absolutely emphatic. I'm certainly, absolutely, positively not the Messiah. And so you can imagine there's a moment of disappointment tinged with relief too. But quickly this passes and is followed by confusion and the remembering of the mission the delegation were sent with – find out who this John is. So they go fishing for what this guy John is about.

Falling back on their Jewish heritage, they ask if John is Elijah. An odd line of questioning if you're not steeped in Jewishness. What they mean with this harks back to Elijah the prophet who was around hundreds of years earlier. He also wore hair and a leather belt, and so John's distinctive clothing that we read about last week, led them to see a similarity between this old prophet and John. John wasn't the first prophet however, to wear hair as a sign of prophecy. There had been false prophets too who did this, and so the Jewish delegation needed to meet John and be sure.

It was really important to find out if John was Elijah come back from the dead because a prophet called Malachi had said that God would send the Jews the prophet Elijah "before the great and terrible day if the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that God will not come and strike the land with a curse." So the Jews expected a return of Elijah before a big apocalyptic event. If this was Elijah, then it was really significant news and heralded a new world era.

But despite him wearing clothing similar to Elijah, John denies it. He is not Elijah come back to life. So the Jews ask again, "Are you the prophet?" Again, a slightly odd question, but it harks way back to a time where the people of Israel were being given their laws by God before they took possession of their land. God said he would raise up for them a prophet like Moses who would lead them and speak God's words to them. This came with dire warnings if the Israelites didn't listen to him, so clearly it was important to find out if John was this prophet come to them finally.

But John isn't this prophet either.

Confused and exasperated, they ask "who are you? – we need to go back to those who sent us with an answer. What do you say about yourself?" And at this point John gives his account of himself in verse 23 of the reading:

"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord".

John isn't an apocalyptic prophet reincarnated to usher in a new era. He isn't a new leader for the people in the way Moses was. Instead, John quotes another prophet from hundreds of years before – the prophet, Isaiah - who predicted the return of the Israelites from their exile in a foreign land. This return became a hope that God would once again return to his people. I haven't got the time to go into that step-by-step, but Jerusalem was conquered when God's presence left the temple, and the return to Israel was only partial until God returned to live among his people, something the Jews were still waiting for.

John therefore, claimed to be announcing this return. John is crying out in the wilderness and preparing the people by washing them for forgiveness of their sins, and so therefore making the paths straight and smooth for the coming of God himself to his people. John is announcing God's imminent return.

The Jews then basically ask him by what authority he is baptizing since he is none of these great figures from history – he's not the Messiah, he's not Elijah and he's not the Prophet to replace Moses – and so who does how think he is to be doing this baptizing, this washing away of sin?

John's response is crucial. Rather than argue about his position and his identity, he simply does what Isaiah said he would do – he points beyond himself at someone greater. He prepares the way for the coming of God himself. John says his baptism is by water, but here there is someone greater than him who he isn't even worthy of being a slave to. He immediately deflects attention from himself to the one he is preparing for and announcing.

This takes us backwards and forwards at the same time. It takes us back to verses 6-8 of our reading where we are first introduced to John as the one who bore witness to the light, but who was most certainly not himself, the light. His job was to point others to it. This verse makes perfect sense with what has just happened with the Jews. John has just denied being the Messiah, but now points towards the one coming after him.

And we travel forwards as well. If John isn't the light, isn't the Messiah, isn't God come back to live among his people, then who is? John was announcing and preparing the way for someone – but who?

And there we have it. We've caught up with ourselves in Advent as we wait for Christmas. We are standing on the banks of the river with John and the Jews, waiting for God to return to his people. Waiting for the Messiah.

Waiting for Jesus. Waiting for God as human. Waiting for the light of the world to be born.

And in the rest of the gospel, this just moves us to the next question, which is the most fundamental we can ever ask. Who is Jesus?

Because, for John, Jesus comes as the Messiah, the one who is God and man at the same time in some amazing way that we don't fully understand. For John, Jesus is God returning to his people on the highway that John has made straight. John is calling out by the river Jordan in the wilderness of Israel – clear all the pathways so that God can return to his people. Jesus is the key and John just points to him.

And Jesus will remain the key all through the rest of his life. People will continue to ask “Who is this Jesus?” that forgives sins, that heals the sick, that performs miracles, that brings dead people to life, that teaches with an authority unheard of before or since, and who finally gives up his life for the world, and then takes it up again as he burst from the grave to conquer our deepest darkest fears and destinies. Who is Jesus remains the key to understanding Jesus' life, but also the key to our own lives. Who do we say Jesus is? Who do we believe he is?

For John, the way needs to be cleared, and perhaps that is our job this Advent – to clear the way in our lives for God to really return to us and take up residence in us. Perhaps we need to think again, or think for the first time about who this Jesus is? Perhaps we need to act on this inkling we have that there is much more going on here than meets the eye? Perhaps we need to look to the light of God who is willing to live among us, if we'd only open up the road to enable that to happen?

Perhaps we live thinking Jesus is someone he isn't – a good man, a teacher, a raving lunatic – but maybe seeing how John prepared for his coming has made us question that. Perhaps we see Jesus as this pure figure that couldn't possibly dirty himself with me and my past and present circumstances – but maybe we see John washing people in preparation for Jesus' coming and we want that washing so that God can live with us again. Perhaps we used to believe or used to come to church but we've lost the sense of God's reality amidst the suffering we see in the world around us, like the people of Israel going off into exile – and so maybe having heard John's announcement of God's return, we have the flicker of hope beginning to burn within us and we desperately want it to be true. Perhaps we've dismissed faith as irrelevant or unbelievable – but maybe listening to John this morning has made us wonder what it might look like if God did really exist and if God did really come to earth to live with us. If any of this resonates with you, then please come and talk to me afterwards. I'd love to be able to help.

In all these supposings, we have John the Baptist, the one assigned to make things ready for Jesus' coming, pointing beyond himself to the coming one who is far greater than we can imagine or dream. For those of us who are Christians, this is our purpose too. Each of us is not Elijah, the prophet, or our own little Messiah; instead we are pointers who prepare the way for God to return to his people, all people, including all people of Menston and Wharfedale. We prepare the way by the way we live, by God's love we share, but also by telling people we know about the Good News that God has indeed come to live with his people, and wants to live with each of us. To shirk this is to be less than we are called to be. So in Jesus name, and following John's example, let us cry out in the spiritual wilderness that we live in and make easy and straight the way of the Lord into each and every person we meet. Amen.

Elijah? – end time figure– v21, Malachi 4:5, Zechariah 3:14, 2 Kings 1:8 Prophet? Deut 18:15-18 – end time figure – Isaiah 40:3 – not escatological figure but he is the one predicted by Isaiah – return of Israelites from exile, but became “type” for return of the Lord to Jerusalem