

Advent 3. John is "the Voice"

Note. I had various slides to accompany this talk but nothing so essential that it cannot be read and understood. I did make a film clip of the opening verses of John's Gospel scrolling across a screen as if it were the opening to a Star Wars film...but the music didn't work!!! Such is life.

Psalm 126 and John 1:6-8 and 19-28

On one of the last occasions I spoke with my Father, he was in the hospital in Kendal and he knew that his time was short and his life was coming to an end. We spoke about his funeral and he said...

Don't talk about me – tell them about Jesus Christ.

I pointed out that it would be a slightly strange funeral if we didn't mention something about him.

We had just read the opening lines of Hebrews and Dad had got caught up in the wonderful words about Jesus

"The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word".

John the Baptist would have been exactly the same – don't talk about me, talk about Jesus Christ.

To go further, I think John the Baptist would be unsettled by the thought that...depending which tradition you follow...the candles on the advent wreath represent

Advent 1 = The Patriarchs – those who first discovered and followed God (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob)

Advent 2 = The Prophets. Those who kept alive the word of God and looked for a kingdom that was yet to come.

And today, Advent 3, John the Baptist, he gets a candle.

I think we would only get away with this IF we made sure the focus remains Jesus Christ.

This week is made slightly tricky in that our reading is from the Gospel of John written by the Apostle John. And introduced to us is John known as the Baptist. We have too many John's, but we shall try to keep track of which one is writing and which one is speaking.

The Gospel of John is markedly different from the other three gospels and starts with a cosmic, eternal, other-worldly and abstract vision.

For those of you excited about the new star wars film – the words of John chapter 1 could scroll across the screen into the far reaches of space at the beginning of a grand narrative with spectacular music playing alongside ...Just like they do in the film...like this...

Film Clip (If only it had worked!!)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God, He was with God in the beginning....

It goes on to talk about Jesus as "the Light" that all things were created through him and he was "the Life".

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It's an epic opening piece of prose to set the scene for what is to follow and what is to follow is presented like a court case – in fact a court case is a good way of thinking about the Gospel of John. The whole book is written to reveal the truth of who Jesus Christ really is.

Verse 6 introduces us to "the Witness" and we'll talk about that in a minute, but the Gospel includes 7 signs all pointing to who Jesus is. We more easily think of them as miracles, like turning the water into wine, but in this Gospel they are referred to as 'signs' pointing to Jesus.

The Gospel includes 7 "I Am" sayings, which are the words of Jesus testifying to who he really is. I am the good shepherd. I am the gate, I am the bread of life, I am the way, the truth and the life and so on.

The whole gospel is to reveal Jesus and in verse 6 we are introduced to John who is going to be the first witness but this is where it starts to get weird.

What I know about a witness in a court case is that you first of all establish their identity, qualifications and the soundness of character – in other words a reliable witness.

In the other Gospels John is introduced as the son of Zechariah – and this reminds everyone he comes from an impeccable family. Or he is introduced as "the Baptist, or Baptizer", which reminds everyone of his powerful preaching and the crowds repenting and being baptised.

It might even help to explain that he has been brought up within the Nasserite tradition, he has never drunk

alcohol and has never cut his hair. He has become a desert dweller, a religious recluse who only comes to the fore when preaching, all this would establish John as a witness.

But in this Gospel none of that is offered, in fact the author goes out of his way to tell us who John is NOT.

Using John's own words we get a series of negatives.

I am not the Messiah.
I am not Elijah.
I am not the Prophet like Moses.

There is an obvious reason for drawing attention to who John the Baptist is not...

The apostle John who is writing for us, is writing at a time when there was still a significant following for John the Baptist. John had his own disciples and followers and some never transferred across to following Jesus. So using the Baptists own words, Apostle John is making it clear

He is not the Messiah
He is not the re-incarnation of a famous OT character
He himself says – it's not about me.

How different to the age in which we live where being known, recognised and followed on social media is thought of as a good thing.

However, John is the witness – so what kind of a witness are you?

John says - I am just a voice.

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Of course he is quoting Isaiah the prophet – (A voice of one crying in the wilderness make straight the way of the Lord) – but it highlights all John would wish to say to us today.

I am nothing, no-body, of no consequence. I'm just a voice saying Behold – the Lamb of God.

There is a TV singing programme called the voice. It was on BBC1 I think it's now on ITV. The idea to begin with is intriguing. Four celebrity singers sit with their backs to the contestants who come on stage and sing. As the programme develops each celebrity has to choose a number of singers and from then on they compete until a winner is chosen – but in the early rounds it's all about the voice.

The celebrities cannot see the singer. They can probably tell a male or female voice, but is the singer young? Old? Tall? Wide? No insight concerning ethnic background – all they have to go on is a voice.

Lets imagine John the Baptist that way.

He's behind us. We cannot see his camel cloak, his long dishevelled hair, his lean frame from years in the desert. All we have is his voice, but his voice is witnessing to someone other than himself.

- He has surpassed me because he was – even before me.
- From His grace we have received blessing after blessing.
- Grace and Truth come through Him
- He will make God known to us.

- He is someone coming who laces I am not fit to untie.

Why should we pay attention to this voice?

John came preaching a message of repentance and getting right with God. Hundreds of people flocked out to hear John, were struck by his message and repented. They were baptised signifying a change of life. John's authority as a voice is the authority given to him by God and attested to by the hundreds and hundreds who went and heard him. He was an authentic voice.

John's only concern though was to point to Jesus. We understand him better if we recall another of his statements about Jesus in Chapter 3:30 He must become greater; I must become less.' John sees himself and understands himself as nothing other than a voice proclaiming and making way for the Messiah.

What does that mean for us on this third Sunday in Advent?

Whether we like it or not we are more than just a voice. Who we are, how we spend our time, what we do, what we say all comes as a package. All of that creates our voice.

We might not say much about it but we do have a background, a family, qualifications, experiences, achievements, failures, a place where we live. This adds to our voice and our voice is saying something whether we like it or not.

All of which can bring a level of anxiety particularly when it comes to faith – what is our witness concerning

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our faith?? What is our voice saying, whether or not we are using words??

Before we get too anxious and before we reach a conclusion, there’s one further aspect to note in the opening of the court case to reveal Jesus Christ.

John the Baptist describes himself as ‘the Voice’.
John the Apostle writes that Jesus is the Word.

In the beginning was the Word.

It is an abstract, philosophical, and theological idea. It says that in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and was God. The Word spoke creation into being. The Word is the Creator.

The Word is also Wisdom represented in Proverbs. I might add in feminine form.

The Word is the ordering force of reason that shapes the cosmos and the human mind.

The Word is the manifestation of divine will and is found in the Torah and the Law.

The Word – creator, reason, will and wisdom becomes flesh – Jesus is the Word. He is all those things. He was and is and is to come.

I guess poetry and music are better at trying to get to the heart of this.

All the Voice can do is try and represent who the living Word is – and if you find it hard to get your head round the odd notion of the Word being God and authoritative

and powerful – it’s made simple for us. It’s Jesus. The voice becomes a witness of Jesus.

So I ask again what that means to us on the 3rd Sunday of Advent and how can we respond to being a voice ourselves without becoming anxious about it?

Experience

Firstly – to be a witness you must first experience that which you testify about. If you asked me what it was like to do a bungee jump I couldn't tell you – I’ve never done a bungee jump.

But I can talk about what it feels like to be forgiven. I can say what it feels like to have purpose and mission. I can tell you what its like to have God on your side. I can say what it’s like to experience the love of God. To be an effective witness you must first experience for yourself.

Truthful and Humble

Secondly – you must only speak truthfully and this means that the words you say must have a true echo in the life you lead. Hypocrisy destroys the voice faster than anything else – it will be exposed. That’s why I love the confession we use in this season based on John’s words – let what is crooked in me become straight.

One of the most difficult areas I had to deal with as a clergyman was that I was also a Governor in a large Academy and over time I’ve been involved in dismissing staff, and permanently excluding pupils. How does THAT fit with a gospel of forgiveness and having a second chance?

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Our faith speaks often about judgement and those being excluded and I could not shy away from the responsibility of safeguarding issues and the consequences of disobedience.

Reflection.

Thirdly - the way I find most helpful about being a witness is to think about one of the metaphors used to describe Jesus. Not, 'the Word' or creator or even life but light.

When I am out running in the early gloom of the morning I wear a high viz jacket so that any driver can see me in the headlights. I don't carry any light - the light is not my light, it's simply reflected back off me.

We are to be reflectors. And the closer we draw to the source of the light, the brighter the reflection will be. Here's the best bit that takes away any stress or anxiety. You don't actually have to try hard you simply have to draw close.