

REFLECTION FOR THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT (13.12.2020)
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Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; John 1: 6-8, 19-28

This is the testimony given by Paul (not the famous one) when asked to preach on the Third Sunday of Advent this year. *He confessed and did not deny it but confessed, 'I am not the right person to do this.'* And they asked him, 'What then? Are you not the minister?' And he said, 'Yes, but I still don't want to do it.'

This is my confession. I'm here to testify that I have a problem with the second and third Sundays in Advent. Week 2 we're invited by our tradition to focus on 'The Prophets' but are invariably given a reading about John the Baptist. Week 3 we're meant to focus on John the Baptist but, by this point, what else is there to say?

In speaking of the mixed blessings of the wilderness, Steph last week kindly prepared the way - straightened the path, if you like - for me to take a clear run at John today. But herein lies the real problem for me. I don't really know what to say about him.

I don't have the description of his rather odd attire and eating habits to latch onto - we got that in Mark's account last week. Neither do I have his activity to dwell on - John's Gospel doesn't even bother to award the man his familiar title. This gospel simply says of its namesake, 'He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.'

And what can I realistically add to that? If you want someone to be able to do this for you, this is my confession, 'I'm not your guy.'

But, as it happens, and for all that we could be drawn in to the minutiae of the cross examination that John undergoes at the hands of the priests and Levites, this is what *his* response also amounts to. They ask him if he's the Messiah, Elijah, the prophet (presumably some end-time figure who, like Moses, will raise the people up) and each time he pretty much says, 'I'm not your guy. This isn't about me. This is about the One to whom I point.'

And when they say, 'Well if you're not the guy, what gives you the right to do all that you're doing?' he speaks of his own limitations, indicates 'I'm doing what I can do' and again points beyond himself.

So maybe this is the point we're meant to come to today, the conclusion we're intended to reach. This isn't about John. And it isn't about us. Which in turn means, of course, that this isn't about me or my issues trying to find something to say about John. If the gospel's underlying point about him is that, 'He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light' then our focus should similarly be on 'the light'. Like John, we should be pointing - beyond him, beyond ourselves - to the One who is to come, Jesus.

Fortunately for us, we also have some words of Isaiah to reflect upon today, words that make that more than possible. Whatever their original intention or meaning, these words have long been associated with Jesus - not least because, in Luke's gospel, they're placed in Jesus' mouth when he takes the scroll of Isaiah in his hometown synagogue at the outset of his ministry and uses them to outline his mission. In doing so, Jesus shows us what God-with-us looks like and reveals what the spirit-led task will involve for all those who'd follow him. Bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed etc., etc., is what the incarnation and therefore an incarnational faith are all about. Delivering real hope to real people - that's what the work of God's kingdom is all about.

But even here, if this is the work that we're called to engage in, (and surely it is) John reminds us that acknowledging our limitations and pointing beyond ourselves is still the only way to go, the only path to take. Although it *involves* us (or should), this work isn't *about* us. It's why the 'Whose kingdom am I seeking to build?' question is always a good and necessary one for us to pose to ourselves. It keeps us on the right path, the straight path.

Direct that 'Whose kingdom am I seeking to build?' question at John and we know that he could answer it unequivocally. He's only interested in preparing the way and pointing to Jesus. In doing so, he reminds us that even when we're carrying light to others, it's not our light that we're offering and we need to be equally clear about that with ourselves as well as with others. There's no place for basking in reflected glory even if/when engaging in small acts of kindness or working to bring about justice provide us with warm, fuzzy feelings and - giving my age away - a *Ready Brek* glow (other oat-based cereals are available).

On reflection, and for all my moaning about not having much to say about John, it seems to me that the very best that we can each hope for in our lives as followers of Jesus is for others to say of us, 'I'm not sure what else to say. He himself - she herself - was not the light, but he/she came to testify to the light.' What better endorsement could there possibly be?