

Homily – Sunday 8th December 2019 – 6 pm

This evening's readings point us towards what it might mean to bear witness, to testify to what we believe. Now, you may, like me, feel just a little queasy about going down the same route as Elijah. As a way of bearing witness, challenging someone to a "my God's better than your God" contest might feel unhelpful. But Elijah lived in a different time and different place. Not only that, but he, like each one of us, had a unique role to fulfil, and the scriptures attest to his great faithfulness as a prophet. Indeed, given that his very name means "my God is Yahweh", it is hardly surprising to find that part of his witness is to seek to demonstrate to the Baals that they aren't worshipping God.

John the Baptist is clearly *not* Elijah. One of the wonderful aspects of John the Baptist, as presented in John's gospel, is that he is just as keen to point out who he isn't as who he is. He is at pains to emphasise that he is neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, not indeed the Prophet. He identifies his own purpose through the words of the prophet Isaiah, that he is "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord'". And when asked why he baptises when he is neither the Messiah, Elijah nor the Prophet, he somewhat cryptically says that he baptises with water while there is another coming after the thong of whose sandal he is not worthy to untie.

It's significant, isn't it, that John knows who he isn't as much as who he is? Because it's a reminder to us that we aren't called to emulate others either – or indeed to wish that we were more like other people. Each one of us is called by God as the person we are. Our witness is unique – it can only be fulfilled by us. To wish that we were someone else risks failing to recognise the gift that we are – and the gift that we can give.

In order to understand John the Baptist a little better, we need to add to our reading a couple of verses from earlier on in the first chapter of John's gospel. They are familiar from our Christmas readings: "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light." As we later discover, John bears witness by baptising and calling people to repent. He identifies his own role as preparing the way for the Lord.

So what, I wonder, is your witness? I wonder how it is that you help people to know God's light and love in the world?

Last weekend, a lot of people were involved in our Christmas fair, making all kinds of wonderful things to sell, offering a warm welcome to people who came to the fair, making and serving refreshments, not to mention those who came to buy things. Where we spread warmth, love, kindness and generosity it strikes me that we are bearing witness to what we believe.

We will all have different preparations for Christmas, and we will approach the season in different ways. For all our desire for the chocolate box image of Christmas, most of us know that reality can be a little more fraught – or indeed more lonely. Yet the ways in which we prepare and our ability to maintain perspective on what is really important is again part of our testimony.

Of course Christmas is just one time of the year – we are called to bear witness throughout the year. And taking a little time during this season of Advent to remember what it is we believe can help us to share the light and love of Christ throughout the year. We each have our own individual ways to do this, and only you will know what they look like in your life... But this is the season to reflect on

what each of us is called to be in our own time and space – not Elijah, not John the Baptist...but each of us uniquely ourselves.

Amen.