

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 13th December 2020
Third Sunday of Advent

Collect

God for whom we watch and wait,
you sent John the Baptist to prepare the way of your Son:
give us courage to speak the truth,
to hunger for justice,
and to suffer for the cause of right,
with Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.

May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

John 1:6-8, 19-28

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.

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, 'I am not the Messiah.' And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the prophet?' He answered, 'No.' Then they said to him, 'Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?' He said, 'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord" ', as the prophet Isaiah said.

Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, 'Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?' John answered them, 'I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.' This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

Sermon by John Richardson

In his new autobiography, Barack Obama describes the occasion when one of his advisors said to him: "Your problem is you keep trying to answer the question."

Obama said: "Isn't that the point?"

"No, Barack, that is **not** the point. The point is to get the message across."

If John the Baptist had an advisor, I suspect he would have given him the same advice.

In today's Gospel, John gives all kinds of strange answers to the question: "Who are you?" When they hear all the answers John gives, his listeners are even more confused than they were before they asked the question. If we analyse the answers John gives, we are really none the wiser.

John says a lot about who he is **not**, but not a lot about who he **is** - at least, not anything that makes sense: "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord."

John wants people to see that he is not the most important person in the story. He has come to tell people something which is of the utmost importance to their lives. What he has come to tell them will in fact change not only their lives but the world in which they live.

Even so, the one John comes to announce doesn't even have a name: "Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me: I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal."

That doesn't tell you much, does it? What it **does** tell you is that something momentous is about to happen, something that will change lives in such a way that things can never be the same again. Everything revolves around the identity of the one who is to come after John. There is no voice from heaven, as one might expect if it is such a momentous event. All there is is John's fragile and vulnerable testimony. And we know how unreliable some testimony can be. Testimony is always a risky venture. Testimony is not proof - only what the witness claims to have seen and heard. All that the witness can do is invite others to accept or reject the testimony - something they will do depending on how credible the witness is.

The Jewish historian Josephus regarded John as being of greater significance than Jesus. So it was not obvious to Jesus' contemporaries that he was the one who was to come.

When you listen to the news on your radio or TV, the person who makes the announcement can take on a greater significance than what is being announced. Just as sometimes you get so carried away by an advertisement that you forget what is being advertised. A political personality can take centre stage and what they are actually saying is either forgotten or treated as being of secondary importance.

Perhaps we have done the same with Jesus.

We can so easily concentrate all our attention on who makes the announcement and forget that what is being announced is of greater importance. Perhaps that is why John's announcement is so brief and to the point. He wants us to see that what is being announced is of far greater importance than the one who is making it.

Reading today's Gospel, I keep coming back to those words: "Among you stands one whom you do not know."

Even when Jesus did begin his ministry of teaching and healing, not everyone was prepared to believe in him or accept what he was saying. To many he remained a mystery. To many he was a charlatan, a rebel, a danger and a threat. To many he was not at all what they expected when they read the prophets and the promise of the coming Messiah. This is surely not what they meant?

“Among you stands one whom you do not know.”

There is a choice here. Nothing is certain. It's not spelt out in black and white. You have to make up your own mind. Look at what's going on. Listen to the teaching. See what is happening to people who are in need of healing and forgiveness. Then make up your mind. Is this the one who is to come, or not?

We have had a bad year. So many have suffered. So many have died. So many are left grieving. There has been such pain and sorrow.

All this has been helped immeasurably by those who have given so much of their time and skills to care for others; those who work in our hospitals, our care homes, our social services, our service industries, our schools.

We should pause sometimes - perhaps more frequently than we do - to ask ourselves why this should be so. Why all the care and self-sacrifice? Why all the compassion and selfless giving? Why all the disregarded for one's own personal safety? Why the willingness to give so much?

We may have seen the forces of the natural world at their worst; but we have surely seen people at their best. And there can be only one answer as to why that should be so. Because in our heart of hearts, at our best, we are loving people who care for each other.

And whether we acknowledge the fact or not, we are loving and caring people because we are children of a loving and caring God. At our best we are simply trying to live Christ-like lives.

Those who give so much of their time to love and care for others have frequently been confronted with those words: “Among you stands one whom you do not know.” They have not known who it is they have loved and cared for, but that doesn't matter - because there are some other words that go with the words “Among you stands one whom you do not know.”

Those words are these: “Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are the members of my family, you did it to me.”

In loving and caring and serving one another we are in fact loving and serving God. In serving one another we do not need to know who they are or what they are. It is enough that they are a child of God.

“Among you stands one whom you do not know.”

In serving the one you do not know, you are serving God.

Amen.