

John 1.6-8, 19-28; Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; 1Thess. 5.16-24  
8 & 10am St. Andrew's, Totteridge  
Third Sunday of Advent: 17th December 2017

*“There was a man sent from God, whose name was John”*

Today's culture seems to have particular need for heroes; super-heroes even. Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman. But this is nothing new - even when those we laud so often let us down - and sometimes repeatedly and surprisingly. I'm thinking now of figures as diverse as the Weinstein brothers in Hollywood, the feted producers of such wonderful Oscar-winning movies as 'Shakespeare in Love'; or the likes of Jimmy Savile, whose 'fixings' forever scarred the lives of hundreds; or the Nobel prize-winner Aung San Suu Kyi of Myanmar (Burma), the one who was going to lead her nation to a new democratic enlightenment, and who instead, still presides, as I speak, over one of the greatest humanitarian crimes of our age against the Rohingya people.

In our anger at the jilting of trust, we try to blame and explain things away. Why didn't anybody complain? They did - they still do. And then I think of leaders across the ages, from Egyptian Pharaohs, to Communists and National Socialists, and yes, I've no doubt there were brave voices complaining throughout all those reigns and abuses of power too. Did that leader linger too long, Mr Mugabe, when they were past their best, because they became too fond of the trappings of success and prestige; or were they too concerned with the *retention of power* rather than *the benefit, or well-being of those they were supposed to serve*.

Whatever their motives, their ability to self-perceive had always been, or became, obscured, opaque or confused. This is a process that repeats itself with dismal regularity - the cause of much pain and suffering - not just for those who fall into the snares of delusion, or who actively seek them out, but for any who decide to fight *with* or *for* them. How many of us, I wonder - had we been gifted or blessed with talents to entertain, communicate or mesmerise in the ways that some can - would have been able to resist the same temptations and delusions that come alongside those gifts. There perhaps, but for the grace of God, go we....

It's got a lot to do with self-aggrandisement - but it's also our fault - we want heroes and we'll keep on setting them up on their pedestals and complaining when they fall off with a dramatic crashing of broken hearts and lives. We want heroes - we want people to be perfect - think of JFK - serial philanderer - think of Winston Churchill - struggling with depression and alcohol. We want them to make everything all right for us - as long as we don't have to do the donkey-work ourselves, or stick our own heads above the parapet.

But it's also to do with an unwillingness to acknowledge power beyond the scientific, the physical and the human, and in our clamour for blame and punishment, to place our trust in the unseen, the peaceful, the compassionate. We like to place our faith in people, and describe the teachings of the ultimate provider, the Lord and God and Creator of all, as fanciful, make-believe, unprovable.

So is it here, in the long, sad litany of human failing (*Saddam Hussein, Muammar Gaddafi, Osama Bin Laden, etc.*) that we may see the imperative of our need for a true Saviour? Is it through these repeated disasters that one day we'll remember that salvation is intimately tied up with the healing of *all* humanity, not just our bit?

We need help... we need forgiveness... we need a Saviour... but we also need those who, despite all their undoubted gifts and strengths and powers, also know that they are *not* the means of that help themselves. We can know them because they tend to point *away* from themselves and *towards* the kingdom of heaven:

*“There was a man sent from God, whose name was John”*

In the Gospel reading we heard just now, the focus shifts dramatically from symbolic abstracts, like ‘witness’ and ‘light’, to an actual historical person. John the Baptist is the chief participant here, and we can understand his appearance not so much in terms of Israel’s past, but in relation to the one who will come after him. The priests & Levites from Jerusalem ask him:

*“Who are you?”*

*“I am not the Messiah”* he replied.

*‘And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?”*

*He said, “I am not”.*

*“Are you the prophet?” he answered “No - I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness. Make straight the way of the Lord”, as the prophet Isaiah said’.* (Isa.40.3)

Some have suggested that John the Evangelist, the writer of the 4G, may have originally been one of John the Baptist’s followers. It may be that he singles out his former leader in

this way in order to clear up differences of opinion in the early church; perhaps some of the Baptist’s followers were too inclined to think of their leader as pre-eminent. Perhaps it suited them to have an association with a powerful and influential prophet. John the Evangelist wanted to make clear that it is not the Baptist who is ultimately important – he’s not even a prophet. He is both herald and witness who, from the depths of the wilderness, has come to announce and prepare - it is the light, the life, the logos, the Word, Jesus Himself, who will restore the broken relationship between The Creator & His Cosmos.

There are many false prophets and wildernesses in our world today, people and places from where all kinds of mixed messages emerge; we hear the voices of those who cry out as a result of their misguidance. It is always our task to sort out the considerate and caring from the manipulative and cruel, the open and honest from the devious and the malign; to try to discern those who serve God rather than themselves.

*“There was a man sent from God, whose name was John”.*

We need to distinguish the Baptists from the beguilers; in the words of Isaiah, to listen out for the good news sent to the oppressed; to rejoice that the broken-hearted will be bound-up; the captives and prisoners set free. How will all this be done? *“There was a man sent from God, whose name was John”.* His voice from the wilderness helps us to focus on what’s important. It echoes down the centuries to us here today, in Totteridge, during Advent. He heralds the coming of Christ.

*Spoken in the name of the Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen.*

## John 1.6-8, 19-28

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup>He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup>He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

<sup>19</sup> This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' <sup>20</sup>He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, 'I am not the Messiah.' <sup>21</sup>And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the prophet?' He answered, 'No.' <sup>22</sup>Then they said to him, 'Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?' <sup>23</sup>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.

<sup>24</sup> Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. <sup>25</sup>They asked him, 'Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?' <sup>26</sup>John answered them, 'I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, <sup>27</sup>the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.' <sup>28</sup>This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

## Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,  
because the Lord has anointed me;  
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,  
to bind up the broken-hearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and release to the prisoners;

<sup>2</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour,  
and the day of vengeance of our God;  
to comfort all who mourn;

<sup>3</sup> to provide for those who mourn in Zion—  
to give them a garland instead of ashes,  
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,  
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

They will be called oaks of righteousness,  
the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.

<sup>4</sup> They shall build up the ancient ruins,  
they shall raise up the former devastations;  
they shall repair the ruined cities,  
the devastations of many generations.

<sup>8</sup> For I the Lord love justice,  
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;  
I will faithfully give them their recompense,  
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.

<sup>9</sup> Their descendants shall be known among the nations,  
and their offspring among the peoples;  
all who see them shall acknowledge  
that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.

<sup>10</sup> I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,  
my whole being shall exult in my God;  
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,  
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,  
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,  
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

<sup>11</sup> For as the earth brings forth its shoots,  
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,  
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise  
to spring up before all the nations.

## 1 Thessalonians 5.16-24

<sup>16</sup> Rejoice always, <sup>17</sup> pray without ceasing, <sup>18</sup> give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. <sup>19</sup> Do not quench the Spirit. <sup>20</sup> Do not despise the words of prophets, <sup>21</sup> but test everything; hold fast to what is good; <sup>22</sup> abstain from every form of evil.

<sup>23</sup> 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. <sup>24</sup> The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

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