

What will we find? John the Baptist

Zeph 3

Phil 4

Luke 3. 7 - 14

Beverley Minster 13.12.15

Why do people come here? Today tens of thousands will come to Beverley on a Christmas pilgrimage – to shop and to wander, and some to come here and enjoy the brilliant outpouring of community and artistry and fun which this Christmas Tree Festival represents. And some of that is because it's Beverley, and the Minster. This town, because of its great church buildings among other things, has an effect. People have always come here, ever since John of Beverley looked for a place of retreat and found a clearing – a lee – in a wood inhabited by beavers: a 'beaver-lee'. The place which commemorates John became a place to celebrate the love and power of God. People journeyed to Beverley because there was something to find. And I think they still do, because somehow the memory is there even today's visitors pilgrims of a different sort.

One of the reasons I went to Israel and Palestine three years ago was because I wanted to understand the role of the place, the geography, and then the buildings, in the story of the Christian faith, the ministry of Jesus. If you've been you'll know that most of the buildings are not very beautiful really. In fact the ones that take your breath away are the ones built by Herod the Great and the Romans, the great fortresses and palaces. The places of Christian significance are a bit of a mess really, a bit scruffy, often no more than caves with slightly shambolic buildings on top of them. I was with a group of people from all round the world, and at the end of the month I showed them a picture of Beverley Minster. Only half jokingly did one ask me why I'd bothered to come to Israel when I could have stayed at home.

And again it hit me that the issue was not the beauty of the buildings themselves, but what they commemorated and signified. Sometimes it was the unassuming humility and ordinariness and littleness which told a deep and powerful story. Take Sebastia, in Samaria, the site of a massive palace and theatre and forum built by Herod the Great. Here it was that Herod's successor imprisoned John the Baptist, here that Salome danced, here that John, the great agitator, met his death, with his head on a tray. It is commemorated in the palace compound by a tiny chapel, almost underground, with room for only two or three people at a time, cared for by the last Christian family in the village, part of a congregation in nearby Nablus numbering two hundred Anglicans among 600 Christians in a city of 160,000 people. But what an influence they have.

'One is coming', said John, 'who is more powerful than I. I'm not fit to repair his shoes.' I have to remind myself, every time I walk into one of the most impressive church buildings in Europe, that it's not about the building, not about me, not about our place on the tourist trail, but about the one to whom we point, like John the Baptist did. Our building preserves the theology and discipleship and aspiration of faithful Christians like John of Beverley, and should continue to preserve and express and make clear that pointing to Christ. I pray repeatedly that each time one of our welcomers greets a visitor that the overflow of that encounter will be the love, and challenge, of Christ. I pray that when people come in and light a candle, or simply look up and wonder, they will be touched by the love of God, and leave with seeds of transformation planted in them.

And I pray that our fellowship and community life and active proclamation of the Gospel will be such that the building becomes the container of holiness, the channel of forgiveness and healing and faith in Christ, not an end in itself. If, in Sebastia, one of the most powerful witnesses to Christ in the death of John the Baptist can be commemorated in a simple chapel in a ruined palace, then we can use whatever we have to point people to Christ. We find ourselves now not surrounded by industry, as we were thirty years ago, but in between the shops, and our job is to use what we have to point only to Christ. We should make sure that, in a nation where up to half of the population say they are of no religion, our leaflets and interpretation boards and our app tell people about why we are here. And this will only work when we as faithful disciples are as desperate to point to Christ as John the Baptist and John of Beverley were.

Wouldn't it be great if people sought out these places not just because they know the buildings are worth a look and beautifully conserved but because they heard that what we are about in serving our communities and region so overflows with the love of God that they cannot help but come? Wouldn't it be brilliant if people didn't encounter a place where petty rivalries and disputes about silly things were at the top of the agenda, but where the people were overflowing with the excitement of the Gospel. Wouldn't it be great if people said, as Zephaniah promised, 'the Lord, your God, is in your midst'? Wouldn't it be great if people found 'the peace of God which surpasses all understanding', as Paul promised the Philippians? Wouldn't it be great if crowds of people came out to be challenged as well as comforted, just like they were by John the Baptist.

We don't need great beauty to do that. But if we have place, and beauty, and history, and position, let's use that to point to Christ, to whom be all praise and glory, now and to ages of ages. Amen.