

Behold the Lamb of God

A sermon given on the the Third Sunday before Advent, 13th December 2020, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in the Attended Communion Service.

John 1:6-8, 19-28

I wonder what would you say was the point of being a Christian? You might think that's a slightly strange question: I'm not asking why are you a Christian, though that would be an interesting and important question and one we might explore some time; but rather, what's the point of being a Christian? How does your being a Christian serve a purpose? Or to put it another way, why does God need people to be Christians?

At the start of all four gospels, there are a couple of key figures who help to set the scene for the Jesus story and who stand as representatives of God's people. And, if you like, they provide us with a kind of template or pattern of what people of faith do, and maybe give us a bit of insight into what the point of being a Christian is.

One of them is Mary, who, by her humble faith in God's promise, gives birth to the word made flesh. Mary is the archetypal disciple, and as we follow her example, we too can, in a sense, give birth to God's words today and play our part in revealing Christ to the world. We sing at Christmas, the Carol 'O little town of Bethlehem', where there's the line, 'Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today'. So we can be like Mary. and she's an example to us of one kind of discipleship, of which there will be more next Sunday.

But the other figure who appears early on in all four gospels is John the Baptist. And John is such a strange and disruptive figure that at first you might not think there is any way he could serve as a model for you and me. Although if you do see me wandering down, Toll Gavel wearing nothing but a camel hair loincloth and munching a bag of Holland and Barrett's best locusts, you'll know I'm giving it my best shot. But there is a more serious way in which John the Baptist can serve as our model. The great Swiss theologian Karl Barth used to have a picture on his desk of the crucifixion, in which John is standing at the foot of the cross, pointing at the tortured figure of Jesus. And he's holding a text from John's Gospel Chapter one, which says simply, 'Behold the Lamb of God.'

So what is the point of being a Christian? The point of our faith is to reveal Christ to a needy and loveless world: we are called either to do it after the pattern set by Mary,

bearing the incarnate Lord in our lives, so that God's loving presence is revealed in what we say and do; or else we do it after the fashion of John the Baptist, pointing away from ourselves to the crucified saviour and saying, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

John directs attention away from himself to the one who might otherwise be overlooked. He directs attention to Jesus's sacrificial role as the Lamb of God, whose suffering and death makes possible the reconciliation of the world with its creator. John points to the last place on Earth where anyone might expect to find God: to the desolation and abandonment of the cross. And in so doing, John helps us to encounter God in unexpected places, in the shadows, in places of difficulty and struggle, in the depths of pain and rejection. And to carry out that ministry, John points away from himself.

In this morning's reading, what we learn about John is more about what he's 'not', rather than what he 'is'. He came as a witness to testify to the light. Witnesses don't draw attention to themselves: it's what they've seen that matters, not who they are. He himself was not the light, it says, but he came to testify 'to' the light. If you like, the attendant in the aisle of the theatre is not to be confused with the star performer up on the stage.

And this theme continues when John is questioned by the priests and Levites from Jerusalem who suspect him of getting ideas above his station. "Who are you?", they demand. And John's response is significant, "I am not the Messiah." He defines himself in terms of who he is 'not' rather than in terms of who he 'is'. His importance lies solely in his pointing to the Messiah. And they quiz him about whether he's some kind of prophet, "No", he says, and they get a bit exasperated. "Who are you then? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" And the only answer John can give is to quote from Scripture, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord." The truth is, at this stage, John isn't sure himself who the Messiah is. John has this burning sense that he's called to be a witness, but until he sees and recognises Jesus for himself, his testimony is pretty vague.

So if John the Baptist is our model, if he shows us the point of our Christian faith, there is both encouragement and challenge. There is encouragement because you can be an effective witness in God's service, even if you don't have a very clear idea about Jesus. That may sound surprising to you, but I believe it's possible for people to point towards God, even if their own faith is a bit wobbly, a bit hazy, a bit unclear. If you are seeking God and if you are wanting to make him welcome. then you can help others to encounter

Christ. God can use even your weak faith. You see, it's not your faith that matters, it's which way you're pointing.

And that is where the encouragement leads on to the challenge. In our western world, we are so used to being the star of our own show, we think the meaning of life is to find happiness and fulfilment for ourselves and to make that the goal of everything. But what if the meaning of life is actually to help others to find happiness and fulfilment? What if the meaning of life is actually to point away from ourselves? That is deeply countercultural. And it's so easy to look at the church and to ask ourselves, "Is it meeting 'my' needs? Is the Minister making 'me' feel welcome? Is anybody noticing 'me'? Is the worship here fulfilling 'my' expectations?"

But what if the point of the church and of your faith and mine is not to seek directly to fulfil our own needs and expectations, but to seek to meet the needs and expectations of others, in particular by pointing to the crucified Lord and proclaiming to the world, 'Behold the Lamb of God'. Because it is as we gaze at our crucified saviour, that we find our unity; that it is as we gaze at the crucified saviour, that we behold the love of God for His world; and it is as we gaze at the crucified saviour that we find our own acceptance and welcome.

That's what John the Baptist does. He's a witness. He points away from himself; he shies away from the spotlight; it's not all about him. In his ministry of offering testimony, he provides a template for Christian discipleship and for the church, and it's summed up in the words of Charles Wesley. His great hymn, 'Jesus, the name high over all' ends:

*Tis all my business here below
to cry, "Behold the Lamb!"
Happy if with my latest breath
I may but gasp his name,
preach Him to all and cry in death,
"Behold, behold the lamb."*

Reading Text

Matthew 25:31-End

⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.

¹⁹ This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰ He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." ²¹ And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." ²² Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³ 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. ²⁴ Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. ²⁵ They asked him, "Why then are you baptising if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" ²⁶ John answered them, "I baptise with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, ²⁷ the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." ²⁸ This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptising.