

John the Baptist ...

... points only to Jesus Christ

A sermon given on the Third Sunday of Advent, 17th December 2023 – by the Curate, the Revd Charlie Shefford, in Beverley Minster

John 1:6-8, 19-28

From 1921 until his death in 1968, Karl Barth, the great Swiss Reformed theologian, had a painting of the crucifixion by Matthias Grunewald hanging above his desk. At the centre of the painting is the crucified Christ; to the left is Mary, John the apostle and an unknown woman; to the right stands John the Baptist with a contorted arm and a comically elongated index finger pointing towards the crucified Christ. A close friend of Barth wrote that the theologian wanted his theology to be like that hand: Barth wanted his theology and ministry to point away from himself and towards the word incarnate in Jesus Christ. Barth's theology was driven by the passion to invite, beseech, urge, strengthen the church and her ministry, whether by criticism or encouragement, to imitate the Baptist with his pointing finger. The season of Advent and today's Gospel directs us in the same way as Karl Barth to emulate the hand of John the Baptist and to point away from ourselves and towards Christ. But who is John the Baptist? It's a question very much on the minds of the priests from Jerusalem in today's gospel. Is he the messiah? No! Is he Elijah? No! Is he the prophet? No!

Every time the religious authorities tried to find out the identity of John the Baptist, they only met with a negative response. Eventually and slightly exasperatedly, they finally asked him, *'Who are you? Let us have an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?'* John gives them an answer - identifies himself as *'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord."* ' This still doesn't actually tell them the identity of John. John's identification of himself is a kind of negation of identity, a negation of self. He doesn't use his own words to identify himself, instead quoting from the prophecy of Isaiah. And in identifying himself, he points away from himself. He acknowledges that he himself is nothing. He is only a voice in the wilderness that points away from himself to the one that is to come to Jesus Christ - John the Baptist is wholly reliant on Christ, his identity, and has no identity outside of Christ: he is not the light; he does not shine of or through himself; he can only pass on a light that he himself has received; he has no saving or salvific significance; all he can do is point to the one that does.

The reformer John Calvin summarised this by saying, the Baptist has no separate function of his own. He is only a sort of preparation for listening to another teacher. John the Baptist does not want to be the Messiah, Elijah or the prophet, all those things that he is thought to be. But his answer does tell us what he wants to be - John wants to be a voice crying out in the wilderness. This is his whole function. He wants to be nothing but the bearer of his calling, to guide people to Christ. The voice that cries in the wilderness has force and meaning not of its own account, but in view of its object - that is, through him who commands it to cry. When the Pharisees ask him why he is baptising, John answers in a veiled manner. He is baptising only to make the unknown one known.

Advent in our own age has departed quite sharply from the example of John the Baptist. Too often Advent has become an opportunity to show off one's wealth, to boast in oneself and to point towards oneself. As Christians, we make the countercultural claim that our true identity is not to be found in consumerism. Our true identity is not found in material wealth, in money or in social class. Our only identity is found as witnesses to Christ. And John the Baptist shows us what this means. Karl Barth wrote that, 'John the Baptist is no independent figure - he belongs entirely to Christ. He is only there to collect and give back the light that falls upon him from the figure of the one and only Christ.'

If we are to belong entirely to Christ and to make straight the way of the Lord both in ourselves and in the world then we must, as Barth did, invite, beseech, urge, strengthen the church and her ministry, both by criticism and encouragement to imitate John the Baptist and his pointing finger. This means being unashamed to proclaim our faith, especially in this season of Advent, to be humble and to point away from ourselves and to point towards Christ, both in worship and in our own lives. And it's the example of John the Baptist that can help and guide us on this path.

In Advent in 1533, Martin Luther preached the following:

"Let us look at the words and finger of John with which he bears witness and points, so that we do not close our eyes and lose our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ, for to the present day John still very diligently, faithfully and richly points and directs us here in order that we might be saved."

His voice sounds forth to make sure you don't miss out on who Jesus is or what he's done for you.

Reading Text

John 1:6-8, 19-28

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. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

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.