

“Through Different Eyes” – John 1:6-8,19-28

You may recognize this morning that our gospel reading seems to be a repeat of last week, presenting to us another look at John the Baptizer. It's not really a complete repeat, however, because the two gospel authors, Mark last week and John this week, provide two somewhat different pictures of this somewhat strange but most important prophet. Mark showed us a rather rough and tough individual, dressed in weird clothes, tromping boldly through the desert, challenging all who would come to him to repent of their ways. The gospel writer John shows John the Baptizer in a somewhat gentler light.

What is especially amazing, though, is not the different views offered by these two authors, but how through different eyes they both provide a similar underlying theme about this unusual prophet: his humility. Now I don't know about you, but 'humble' is not a word that comes to my mind when I think of John the Baptizer. 'Weird'. 'Strange'. 'Offensive'. 'Smelly', even. But certainly not 'humble'. I suspect my less-than-flattering mental images of John the Baptizer come from old Sunday School books - showing a wild and wooly character, long hair and beard of course, eyes afire with passion, deeply furrowed bushy eyebrows and a most severe and stern frown, driven crazy by the stings of desert sun and scorpions. 'Contentious', 'argumentative', 'confrontational', yes. 'Humble'? No way!

But 'humble' is exactly what both the evangelist John and the gospel writer Mark show the Baptizer John to be. Both of them emphasise how John the Baptizer directs attention away from himself, and points instead to the one who would follow, namely Jesus; and it is here in John's gospel that we begin to understand the reason why.

To see that we need to look at the structure of the beginning of John's gospel. While it's not clear in English, the opening eighteen verses are poetry, a poem praising the eternal divine Word, agent of creation and redemption, who becomes flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. However, twice in that poem (v.6-8 which we just read and v.15) the author breaks into the poem with prose to explain quite emphatically, "I am not talking about John". While it is true John was sent from God, he was not the Word, he was not the Light, he was not the Life of the world. John was instead a witness to the Word, Jesus Christ. To make sure that we understand the relationship between John and Jesus, the author three times in the first part of our reading, v.6-8, calls John a 'witness'. (That the Greek word that translates as 'witness' is 'martyr' gives us a clue as to how the story will unfold later!)

Following that opening poem, the author begins the narrative with what amounts to a title, "This is the testimony [witness] given by John". There are two parts to that testimony, the part concerning John himself, and a testimony about Jesus. We read only the first part, the bit about John. To begin, we should notice that he did not spontaneously talk about himself – his testimony about himself is in response to probing, even challenging questions put to him. And this was no mere casual conversation: he was being investigated by a team of righteous investigators on a mission to see if he was violating any religious laws – which would be a serious crime indeed. "Who are you?" they asked, getting right to the point. Now John, weird though he might have been, seems to have been at the very least astute, because his answer reveals he suspected this team of investigators had an agenda. "I am not the Messiah" he protests. Twice, in fact, we are told he 'confessed'. John the Evangelist makes sure that we the readers are in no doubt whatsoever just how emphatic the Baptizer John's denial of being the Messiah was. So that we are in no doubt as to John's declaration, we are told not only that he denied it, but emphatically confessed that it was not true.

Even a second round of questioning, this time from the dreaded Pharisee religious police, fails to shake him. They move right to the point: “if you’re not the Messiah nor Elijah nor the prophet, who are you and why are you daring to baptize?”

John’s answer to this second team of investigators is the key and telling comment, defining not only his total humility but also a pattern of witness for all time. “Enough about me”, he says, “you need to pay attention to one who stands among you, whom you do not know ... the one who is coming after me”, clearly implying not only that this one is indeed the true Messiah – he will even go on shortly to declare plainly about Jesus, “I have testified that this is the Son of God!”

“One who stands among you.” What a stunning theological statement that is! To a world accustomed to religious understandings of gods cavorting with people, and producing mythical half-god-half-human beings who would certainly stand out in any crowd; to an Israelite people whose foundational understandings of God were of an all-powerful, remote and barely approachable Deity, John claims that the Son of God is standing in the middle of them all, unnoticed and unrecognized. How could this be?! How could it be possible that the Messiah, whom everyone just knew would come riding in on thunderclouds, shooting lightning bolts right and left, dropping fire and brimstone on all and sundry, crushing mountains with a single blow and causing seas to boil under a blistering glare from blazing eyes – how could it be possible that such a Messiah instead was standing right in the middle of them all, had come anonymously?!

However, as we celebrate during this Advent Season we understand how it happened, with the Messiah arriving not in a whirlwind of destruction but lovingly, laid tenderly in sweet hay in a humble manger in a stable, of all places, in a tiny backwater of the Empire. We know this was the One, that baby who through his own humble service to God brought God’s redeeming love and salvation and reconciliation to the world and to all in it who would hear and accept. This was Jesus, the Son of God: who was born a fragile infant, who walked the dusty roads and the crowded streets, who ate and drank with sinners and healed them through his acceptance of them, who took the time to talk and to listen and to touch and be touched, who whenever he was interrogated said “enough about me, it’s about the Father who sent me”. Jesus, who in true and humble service placed himself in the ultimate harm’s way, offering himself up even to an agonizing death on the cross on our behalf, yours and mine, proclaiming to a repentant criminal even at the end, “this day you will join me in paradise”.

Perhaps in this season of Advent as we take a look at John the Baptizer through different eyes we might also look at ourselves through different eyes. Seeing anew John the humble Baptizer, declaring he is not the one and pointing to Jesus offers us a glimpse of what the church is called to be, what we are called to do, in faith. Doing that might give the world a chance to see Christianity through different eyes as well.

“I am not the One” John proclaimed. Can you imagine how the world would respond if the church were to follow that model of witness in every corner? Consider the response from a world hungry to encounter God if the church were to affirm “it’s not about us, it’s about Jesus, the Christ.” How might the world see the church differently when the message “it’s about our beautiful building” is replaced by “join us coming close to God in worship”? Would a world starving for justice not find hope in a proclamation that “it’s not about our status in society, it’s about finding favour with God in Christ”? Through different eyes we can see John the Baptizer as a model for our own witness, and with the help of God’s Holy Spirit help the world to see us, to see Christ, to see God through different eyes also.