

“The Messiah - But Not As Expected” – Isa 61:1-4,8-14, John 1:6-8,19-28

So, we’ll begin today with a pop quiz ... how many of you remember the sermon from last week? How many remember the gospel reading? How many of you may think our gospel reading is a repeat of last week, dealing with John the Baptizer? Those of you who both answered in the affirmative and actually listened may have recognized some differences between last week’s and this week’s readings. The differences arise because the two gospel authors – Mark last week and John this week – give us two somewhat different pictures of this somewhat strange but most important prophet ... this is a bit like two witnesses to a car accident. 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. In contrast with that picture, the gospel writer John shows John the Baptizer in a somewhat gentler light.

Even though we see different views offered by these two authors, nevertheless we still note how through different eyes they both provide a similar underlying theme about this unusual prophet: he was humble. Now I don’t know about you, but ‘humble’ is not usually the first word that comes to my mind when I think of John the Baptizer. ‘Weird’, yes. ‘Strange’, certainly. ‘Offensive’, probably. ‘Smelly’, quite likely. But certainly not ‘humble’. Why is that? Well, our somewhat repulsive images of John the Baptizer most often 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. We think of John the Baptizer as having been negative, contentious, confrontational – anything but happy and rejoicing. But, ‘humble’? No way!

However, ‘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 the Baptizer does so and perhaps we can begin to see the connection with rejoicing in the other scripture selections we just read.

To see a different picture of John the Baptizer we need to look at the structure and content of the beginning of John’s gospel ... and more importantly we need to keep straight in our minds which John I’m referring to each time. While it’s not very 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”. Yes, says John, that John was sent from God but 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’. (Somewhat ominously the Greek word that translates as ‘witness’ is ‘martyr’ giving us a hint as to how the story will unfold later!)

Following that opening poem, the gospel writer John 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 a hidden agenda. “Whoa, 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, one 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?!

And this is where the link to the Isaiah passage comes in. You may recall how our Isaiah passage begins – “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me...” You may also recall from Luke’s gospel how these are the very words Jesus began to read from the scroll in the synagogue in Nazareth. And you might further remember that Jesus went on to tell the worshipers gathered there, “today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” His message was clear; Jesus was telling them that he was indeed the one to come, proclaimed by Isaiah and affirmed by John the Baptizer.

The people in Nazareth were at first very proud of their hometown boy, for we are told “all spoke well of him, and were amazed at the gracious words that came out of his mouth.” There was indeed rejoicing in Nazareth, at least until they demanded that Jesus do the same miracles there that they had heard he had done in Capernaum. When he refused, saying that they would not honour him there even if he did perform miracles, the townspeople became enraged. When he pointed out that even Elisha cured only one leper and that was not an Israelite but a foreigner – Naaman the Syrian – they even tried to kill Jesus. There was no more rejoicing in Nazareth that day!

By now I suspect you may be getting a bit confused with references to John the Baptizer, John’s gospel, the prophet Isaiah, and Luke’s gospel. So, let’s come back and weave all these threads together into one cohesive fabric. We’ll begin with Isaiah, proclaiming a word of comfort to the people of Israel, a promise of restitution and cause for rejoicing. Through Isaiah God also promised a messiah, a saviour who would redeem the suffering people of Israel. Over the years the Israelites came to believe that the promised messiah would bring salvation

primarily through the exercise of political and military might – would be another great conquering saviour king just like David.

We have hints that even John the Baptizer held this image of a mighty, conquering messiah in mind, for example his claim that he himself was not worthy of untying the sandals of the one to come. Notwithstanding Luke's touching story of the in-the-womb infant John recognizing his cousin in-the-womb Jesus, in later life even John had to send his people to find out if Jesus really was the promised One to come – to which Jesus responded with another quotation from Isaiah as we saw last week.

It took a while for people to realize that the cause for rejoicing proclaimed in Isaiah, namely that Jesus had indeed been “clothed ... with the garments of salvation, ... covered ... with the robe of righteousness” had been fulfilled, but not in the way that they had expected. Instead of a mighty warrior king the messiah had come as an infant child, born to an ordinary young couple in a nowhere village – an infant child, but the One who would conquer both death and sin and reconcile those who would believe in Him with God.

As we celebrate and rejoice during this Advent Season we understand how it happened, with the Messiah arriving not in a whirlwind of destruction but lovingly, placed tenderly in sweet hay in a humble manger in a stable, of all places, in a tiny backwater of the Empire. We are blessed because we know he 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”. The one whom John declared to his listeners as standing among them still stands among us today, but we are blessed that we do know him, and love him, and celebrate once more his coming among us.