

Homily for The Third Sunday of Advent 2020 (Year B)

The conversation between John the Baptist and the Jewish priests is most unusual. Three times the priests suggest perfectly reasonable possibilities for who John is, people that the Jewish nation were expecting and watching for:

‘Are you the Christ?’ ‘No’;

‘Are you Elijah?’ ‘No’;

‘Are you the Prophet?’ ‘No’.

So who are you? The correct answer also comes from the scriptures; the priests have been looking in the right place, but have not found the right answer.

‘I am as Isaiah prophesied ‘a voice that cries in the wilderness: Make a straight way for the Lord’.

The scripture readings today are all about identity. They all address the question that many of us spend a whole lifetime avoiding: ‘Who are you?’. Isaiah talks about the anointed one who brings good news to the poor, binds hearts, proclaims liberty and exults in the Lord. St Paul calls the Thessalonians to be people of joy and gratitude; John the Baptist identifies himself as a voice crying in the wilderness, a witness to the light. Almost more important than John’s clarity about who he is, is his clarity about who he is not. He knows, and clearly states, that he is not the Messiah, not Elijah, not the prophet. He knows that he is a witness to the light, he emphatically is not the light.

John’s clarity about his identity is admirable – not just in the sense of being something good, but also being something that we might want to learn from. He is very clear: he is not the light. He is the moon which reflects the light of the sun, but he is not the sun itself. He is not the centre around which everything revolves, he is subservient to that centre, and glad to be so. This can be a hard lesson for us to learn. If someone asked us ‘Are you the centre of the world’ we would, of course, answer ‘No’; but we don’t always behave as if that were so. Much of our frustration at the world, our impatience, our irritability, flows from the fact that deep down, and perhaps never openly acknowledged by us, is the feeling that everything revolves around us. Much of the sense that we are not in control, that things are not going as we want them to, flows from the fact that other people are involved in our lives, and they do not decide and act on the basis of what we want.

Today’s scripture readings invite us to examine honestly the issue of identity. Who am I, really; what is my real place in the world; who am I not? John the Baptist has seen very clearly that his fundamental role is to be a witness to the light. He lives (and, indeed, he dies) in order to point people towards the light. In a world where lots of little lights spark into flame and shine briefly but brightly we are easily distracted, fluttering like moths from one flame to the next, but John the Baptist is very clear that there is only one light worth pursuing, and he points the way to him. Who are you; who am I? We are all witnesses to the light. We will never find our true place in the world until we learn this and accept it at a deep level. I am not the sun, I am one who leads others into the light, who points the way, and if that means pointing them away from myself, then so be it.

John the Baptist shows us with great clarity a life lived by a person who knows his real identity, and although his life is an austere one it is also a joyful one, right from the moment that he leapt for joy in his mother's womb when the pregnant Mary visited her. This is the other great theme of this Third Sunday of Advent: joy. In such uncertain times it is not so easy to talk of joy. How are we to plant seeds of joy into a world of uncertainty, loss and anxiety? Can joy take root in such unproductive soil? The joy of Christmas comes from the fact that we find ourselves suddenly, and unexpectedly, part of a remarkable story. Whoever we are, whatever our circumstances are, we are a part of the story in which God fulfils the ancient promise, and makes real our deepest longings. This is not a story that we read about at a distance, it is a story that we are a part of, it is our story. It is us he has come to visit, our towns, our villages, our homes. Our actual, real, complicated and conflicted lives have been visited by a great mystery. The Holy Family has briefly stopped at our door, and blessed us as they pass. This is something to be joyful about. But we will only be able to rejoice if we know with absolute clarity who we are, and who we are not. We must learn, as John the Baptist did, that we are not the light, not the centre of everything. The Holy Family passes by, but they have not come to pay homage at our court, not come to seek our approval and our blessing. They have come to expose for us the light, to hold it up for us to see, so that we can choose to become witnesses to the light.

Saint Teresa of Calcutta, who had a very clear idea of her identity, of who she really was, once reflected on our longing for Paradise, and our failure to find it:

“We wait impatiently for paradise, where God is, but it is in our power to be in paradise even here on earth and from this moment. Being happy with God means loving like him, helping like him, giving like him, serving like him” (*The Joy of Giving to Others*, 1987, p. 143).

As long as we think of ourselves as the light, we will not know joy, only frustration. When we discover that we can live in God's presence even now, that we can fall to our knees as the Holy Family passes by and clap our hands in wonder, then we are well on the way. When the shepherds returned to their fields from the stable they were still poor, still a little smelly, rejected and avoided: but they were full of joy in their new identity. They had seen the true light, and now they are witnesses to it. Like John they are not the light, and they know that; they are witnesses to the light, and that is enough for them.