

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Third Sunday of Advent (Year B) 1⁷th December 2023

John the Baptist has appeared in the wilderness, where he is preaching and baptising. He is causing quite a stir. We heard last week about the crowds who are flocking to hear him. He has made so many waves that the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem have heard about him, and want to know more. They send out a deputation to ask: 'Who are you?' John, who is a preacher and so is full of words, does not in fact answer them. He doesn't tell them who he is (although he does tell them what he is doing) but he is at great pains to tell them who he is not. News about him has spread like wildfire. He is intriguing, fascinating, mesmerising, and he seems to have the answers that people want. But when he is asked who he is, the reply is along the lines of 'don't bother about me, I am just a warm-up, I am just preparing you for something better, you haven't seen anything yet'. This seems quite extraordinary. Can you imagine any politician, any writer, any media personality, faced with crowds of people calling out praise, asking them if they might be the Saviour, the answer to all the worlds ills - can you imagine any of them saying 'you're looking in the wrong place, I am not the one, I just point the way'?

What is so mesmerising about John, it turns out, is his simple authenticity. What you see is what you get with John. He is under no illusion about who he is, he knows that he has a job to do but he is not stupid enough or arrogant enough to think that he is the main event. Pointing out what is great in someone else turns out to be much more convincing than pointing out what is great in myself.

John will not say who he is, but he is clear about what he does. He goes out into the wilderness to call out 'God is near!' This is not done to get people panicked into an awareness of their own failures; it is done to make sure they do not miss him as he passes by, do not miss the chance at joy that he brings. Still John goes out into the wilderness to call out - or if not John then other Johns, more concerned to see what is great in another than in themselves. So they go out into the wilderness of pleasure-seeking, a desolate and soulless place; or the wilderness of greed; or into the wilderness of self-obsession; or the wilderness of superficial materialism. Into all these desert lands the prophets go to call out 'Do not forget God, he is very near!'

Strangely John, who seems an austere man (pauper's clothes and scant food) with an austere message (Repent) appears to be a magnetic draw to people. In him they see this authenticity, but also they see - perhaps without recognising it - that here is a man who has lived in the presence of God; he has been visited by the Holy One (indeed the first such visit was when Mary came to Elizabeth, before John was even born).

While he refuses to say who he is, John does say what he is: a witness to speak for the light. In a world of darkness and shadows, how important this is! He bears witness by saying to the people: 'God is real, and he has touched my life and transformed it, and in this I have found joy'. John does not make the elementary mistake of thinking joy and pleasure are the same. He has found joy because he has been visited by someone beyond himself, someone far greater than he could even begin to imagine, and this someone was a generous gift. He knows that he is part of a great

story, a story which he does not have to write all alone, a story that he co-writes with someone who is all gift, all grace, all love. He has been visited by a mystery of great beauty, and this is enough, there is nothing more that he needs. John was a poor man, visited by generosity, a recipient of grace and mercy, and this has left him unable to stop himself: he must do the same, he must witness to the same. The joy he experienced in receiving the love of Christ is, he has discovered, a pale shadow of the joy that he experiences when he shares that love with others, when he sets out to love as God loves, to act as God acts. John, the freed sinner, has found joy in setting other sinners free. The last thing he would ever do is bind himself in chains again by pretending that he is the saviour himself!

So what is the message of this Sunday's Gospel? John, who has been bathed in praise and admiration, is not so stupid as to believe it all. He brushes it aside: he is not the focus of attention, he is not the answer to what people need, he is there to point away from himself. The imposter voice that whispers in his ear 'you are amazing, just look at what you can do' makes no impression, it is just brushed off. He has too much work to do to bathe in a glory that belongs elsewhere. John has discovered that a true and lasting joy, the joy that will allow him to echo the prophet 'Rejoice in the Lord always' is found in welcoming Christ into his story, to write it with him, and then in bringing that same Christ into other lives.

John calls out to us not to put ourselves at the centre of our world. There is no space for me within the Christmas crib, I need to know that I belong outside it. Like John I need to be brave enough to enter the desert wastes of our world and carry Christ there. To be the instrument through which he enters into the lives of others, that is the greatest joy.