

Advent 3 John 1:6-8 & 19-28

We are at the 3rd Sunday of advent and our focus for this Sunday is John the Baptist. He made an appearance last week as we remembered the prophets but this Sunday is all about the Baptist. John certainly knew his scripture and according to the testimony of St John the Gospel writer, John the Baptist was a witness to the light that was coming into the world.

That witness came in the form of John, on the banks of the Jordan River, preaching a gospel of repentance. There is little in John's gospel account to describe the Baptist's ministry and teaching but from the other 3 gospel descriptions we know he was doing something radical and new.

Unsurprisingly John gets quite a name for himself and pretty soon people are starting to wonder, as a man so different, so special, so Godly, what is happening here? They wonder about the prophecy that Elijah will return, could this man be Elijah? They know of the promise of a messiah, is this it? He is fulfilling prophecies left, right and centre so is he the messiah? John himself answers those questions with a resounding no. There is another who will come and I am not worthy to even tie his sandal, he says. Despite that, many people still followed John.

But John the Baptist was clear about his mission, he was the one sent to prepare the way for the lord. He was the last of the prophets, he was the greatest of prophets. John laid aside every plan for his future, every human and societal responsibility and gave his life to God. He shunned comfort and the easy route for the wilderness and dangerous preaching, and ultimately, he lost his life doing God's work.

Just like the current celebrations that are going on around us, the glitz the music and decorations are all in preparation for Christmas itself, so it was with John the Baptist. He looked a lot like Jesus, his message was one of repentance, of turning to God. He challenged the religious authorities just like Jesus would do throughout his ministry, having been educated through prayer and communing with God that these leaders were as corrupted by money, status and power as everyone else but in their case it was worse because they ought to have been above such things, living holy lives set apart for God. Yes, in many ways John the Baptist was just what the crowd were looking for, he ticked many boxes on the description of what the messiah would look like but a little more patience was required.

As we wait for the season of Christmas to be upon us again this year, we also wait for Jesus to come amongst us a second time, something for which we are always waiting, not just in advent. And in our waiting John the Baptist continues to have an example to set for us. John the Baptist was a witness to the messiah, he knew very clearly what he was called to do. Many people followed him, they would support and give him glory if he would have accepted it, he became a figure of fascination to the people and the leadership alike. But John the Baptist was not a seeker of glory, indeed he would not accept it.

When the Jewish leaders asked who he was, he could have answered in a way that brought personal gain and kudos, but John was not like that. As a prophet of God, John had heard the word to be proclaimed and dedicated his life to doing just that. Despite the following and attention he gained, John's whole ministry was dedicated to pointing to another. He fulfilled the role of teacher and baptiser, but he did so while freely admitting that his ministry would pale into insignificance when the messiah came.

We, too, are called to be witnesses to the truth that we have come to know. We are not Jesus, we are Jesus followers. We cannot do what Jesus did, but we can tell others what the effect of Jesus' life, death and resurrection has had on our lives. We, like John the Baptist, can take no credit for the grace by which we have been saved, but likewise we bear no responsibility for the choices others make to accept or reject that same grace in their lives.

We are witnesses, nothing more, nothing less. John the Baptist was the first witness to point directly to Jesus and confess him to be God's chosen one and he was able to make that claim because of the message God had given him as a chosen prophet. We can be witnesses today because we have known Jesus through word, sacrament, prayer and experience. Our witnessing may not take the same form as John the Baptists', we need not set up camp by the river and call passers-by to repentance, but our witness is still vital.

How else will the people around us come to know the saving love of Jesus, if no one tells them or better still, shows them? Christian witness is as necessary and powerful as it ever has been and by our words, our actions and our loving service others will know we are Jesus people. Let us all reflect on the witness of John the Baptist and in the busyness of this advent season, reflect on ways that we can witness to the love of God in our circumstances today.