

John the Baptist

John 1.6-8 and 19-28

Well, today is the third Sunday in advent, and as we were reminded as we lit our advent wreath, this is the day upon which we remember how God used John the Baptist to prepare the way for the coming of his Son, Jesus.

And we have much, I think, to learn from John the Baptist.

The first is that he did not think too highly of himself.

Some of you may have heard of Sandy Millar. For many years he was vicar of Holy Trinity Brompton Church in London, and then was made a bishop in the Diocese of London.

While I was in Wrexham we invited him to come and preach; not expecting for one minute that someone of his standing would come.

He did.

And as he sat in our lounge chatting over a cup of tea I asked why he had accepted the invitation.

“Well”, he said, “It was just so kind of you to ask.”

In our gospel reading this morning, John is preaching in Bethany, and the scribes and Pharisees send messengers to find out what is going on.

And if John had pretensions to grandeur, this would have been the time for John to big himself up; to remind everyone of his miraculous birth; his special job.

But instead he deflects attention away from himself to the one for whom he was preparing the way.

For John, it was not about him, but about Jesus.

And here then is the second lesson that we might learn from John:

If the first lesson is that we must not think too highly of ourselves, then the second is that it is impossible to think too highly of Jesus.

John knew that despite the way God had been miraculously at work in his life, he was not even worthy to do the most menial job of getting down on his knees and untying Jesus' sandals.

Now, there is, of course, a danger in not thinking too highly of ourselves and of not thinking too little of Jesus;

And that is that we then think that we are good for nothing.
We ask, "What could I ever do that's of any value?"
And we find ourselves, like Penelope Pitstop, thinking of ourselves as
"little old me"
And like Bill and Ted, stuck in a perpetual state of "we're not worthy".

But this is not what we find with John the Baptist.
For we find John, a wild and rugged man, with fire in his belly preaching
hell fire and damnation, and calling people to repentance and renewed life in
the light of Jesus' coming.

So, lesson number 3: we must not think too little of who God has made
us to be and what he calls us to do.

John may not have been the Messiah, he may not have been Elijah or
"the prophet" but he was John the Baptist; and God had a role for him to play.
And he went about that role faithfully and passionately.

What was his role?

To point people to Jesus and to prepare people for meeting Jesus.

It was some time ago now that I was at theological college in Cambridge.
I learnt many important things there, like how to steer a punt and how to hit a
croquet ball.

But there was one invaluable lesson I learnt that I hope will always stay
with me.

One day while worrying about all manner of things, my New Testament
lecturer looked me in the eye and said, "Gary, are you the messiah?"

Well, even I knew the answer to this question.

"No!" I said.

"Well then" my lecturer said, "It's not your job to save the world."

How right he was.

It's not our job to save the world.

That's Jesus' job.

We can let him worry about that.

But what Jesus wants from us is our love and our obedience.

It has been said that God does not need people with bright ideas.

He can do 'bright ideas' himself.

What God desires is people who will be obedient to him; faithful to his call upon their lives.

And this is what we see in John the Baptist isn't it?

A man whose job is to be a "voice crying out in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord"

preaching his heart out about the One who was to come and calling people to make themselves ready for him.

So, let's get practical for just a few moments.

If we are going to be people who rather than thinking highly of ourselves, but think highly of Jesus,

If we are to be people who know we have a high calling to love Jesus and faithfully obey him, what will our lives look like?

Well, the simple answer is surely that, like John the Baptist, we will point people to Jesus.

St Paul tells us that the relationship between husband and wife mysteriously mirrors the relationship between Jesus and the church (Ephesians 5 .32)

If we are married then, we will seek to conduct our marriage in a way that shows something of the love between Jesus and the church.

Jesus taught us to call God father (Matthew 6.9).

Those of us who are parents will seek to model good parenting to our children to point them to their perfect father in heaven.

And we will teach them to know and love God for themselves.

St John reminds us to love one another (1 John 3.11).

As we seek each other's good as a community of faith, people might see what a people shaped by Jesus looks like.

St James tells us that pure religion is to care for orphans and widows (James 1.27).

As we care for those around us, as we seek justice for the poor and oppressed, people will see Jesus.

Jesus tells us to go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them and teaching them his commands (Matthew 28.19-20)

As we share what we know of Jesus with the people and villages around us; and as we support the mission of the church in this country and overseas, we give people the opportunity to hear of Jesus and find a relationship with God through him.

You know, being a follower of Jesus really isn't rocket science.

Dare I suggest that the whole of Christianity can be summed up in two phrases?

God loves us, so we love God.

God loves others, so we do too.

But because we are not yet perfect we struggle and need, with God's help, to work at it.

Because we are not yet perfect we fail and need God's forgiveness.

And because the world is not yet perfect we will face difficulties and opposition.

John the Baptist ended up in jail and beheaded for his commitment to Christ!

But let's be of good heart and press on.

Success or failure in building God's kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven is God's problem, not ours.

We must simply love Jesus and be obedient to him;

He will save the world.