

Sunday 17th December 2017 (3rd Sunday of Advent)

St Faith, Havant

8.00am – Mass & 9.30am – Parish Mass

Isaiah 61.1-4,8-end; 1 Thessalonians 5.16-24; John 1.6-8,19-28

Who are you?

As we heard last week, John the Baptist (or John the Baptizer) was causing quite a stir. To be honest, when a man turns up dressed in camel hair, munching on a locust, telling everyone they are a “brood of vipers” and demanding that they repent, it’s only natural that he might provoke a bit of comment – and some interest from the authorities. It shouldn’t come as any surprise that the Jewish authorities decided they had better find out a little more about him. So they track him down somewhere across the Jordan river, and ask him a very simple question.

“Who are you?”

Well it might be a simple question, but it doesn’t get a very simple answer. “Who are you?” “I am not the Messiah.” Well, thank you. That *really* narrows things down, doesn’t it?!

The next couple of questions give away the fact that the Jewish authorities think there’s something big going on here, even if they can’t work out what it is. The Jewish scriptures, what we know as the Old Testament, had led them to expect that the coming of the Messiah would be heralded either by the return of Elijah, or by the appearance of a prophet who would be like Moses. And – even though John denies being either – the Jews

aren’t wrong, in a way, because John is indeed the herald of the Jesus, the coming Messiah. But just as Jesus won’t be the Messiah the Jews are expecting, so John doesn’t want to identify himself with the heralds that the Jews are expecting. In fact, he doesn’t really want to identify himself at all. The best answer the Jews get out of him is a quote from Isaiah, in which John characterises himself as the anonymous “voice crying out in the wilderness”. For John himself, his own identity isn’t important. It’s all about Jesus.

When we think of him as ‘John the Baptist’ or ‘John the Baptizer’, there’s a risk we miss the point that he himself wanted to make. Yes, he was particularly famous for baptizing people. But his own motivation for doing so was to get people ready for something – someone – who was coming next, someone far more important. He is, as John the gospel writer puts it, “a witness to testify to the light”. His baptizing is part of how he does that witnessing, but it doesn’t define who he *is*. When confronted by the Jewish authorities demanding to know who he is, John talks instead about “the one who his coming after him”. In many ways, John the Baptizer isn’t really ‘John the Baptizer’ at all. He is ‘John the Witness’.

John caught the attention of the Jewish authorities because the kind of things he was saying and doing. If we’re looking for a manifesto of the kinds of things *we* might to do, our

reading from Isaiah is a pretty good starting point. "Bring good news to the oppressed, bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, comfort all who mourn".

When the names of departed loved ones hang on our Christmas trees, we do something to comfort those who mourn. When our buildings host Gamblers, and Alcoholics, and Narcotics Anonymous, we do our bit to help to release those held prisoner by addiction. When we offer coffee and companionship pretty much every morning in this church building, we might well be binding up the broken heart of a lonely person. When we support and resource the work of groups combatting the issues of homelessness in this area, we contribute to some good news for those who may well have found something in their life too oppressive to bear.

That last one, issues around homelessness, seems to have attracted people's attention in a particularly strong way at the moment. But in their own way, perhaps often a quieter way, a more low-key way, all of these and so many more are things which we in this parish are doing which might attract somebody's attention. These are the kinds of things which might prompt people to look at us, and ask us the question – 'Who are you?'

I wonder what our answer would be?

Are we the people who try our best to help others? Well, yes, I would hope we are. We definitely should be people who try our best to help others. But that shouldn't be the whole answer. There are lots of people and organisations who are there to help others, often better placed and resourced than us. What makes us different?

Are we the people who do their best to maintain and improve some important buildings in the town? Again, yes, we are – even when those buildings sometimes feel like more of a challenge than an opportunity. We have the present responsibility of being stewards of parts of this community's history and identity, of shaping that identity going forwards, and it is right to take that seriously. But other people also have those kinds of responsibilities. It shouldn't be the whole answer. What makes us different?

Are we the people who gather together every Sunday morning? Again, yes, we should be. But again that shouldn't be the whole answer. People gather together every Sunday morning to play football. Why do we gather? What makes us different?

Who *are* we?

John's story didn't start and end with the baptisms he did and the words he said. John's own story about himself was all about being a witness, about testifying to the light. Everything he did and said was all about pointing to the one coming after him,

the one far greater than him. Everything John did and said cried out, "Make straight the way of the Lord".

So: Are we the people who meet every Sunday, who raise money for buildings, who try to help people in all kinds of need? Or is there more to our story? Do we consistently and clearly point to the one who is far greater than we are? When what we do attracts the attention of others, are we prepared to testify to the light of Christ? In Isaiah's words, are we going to "proclaim the year of *the Lord's* favour, and the day of vengeance *of our God*"? Will we be witnesses?

When people ask us the question 'Who are you?', are we ready and willing to answer that we are the voices crying out "Make straight the way of the Lord"?

Who are we?