

Sermon 17/12/23 John 1: 6-8, 19-28

And the award for best supporting role goes to John The Baptist.

John is not a person who keeps appearing in the gospel story, in fact he is quite a shady figure, but his presence in the narrative is important to our understanding. In film terms I imagine him slinking back to his own trailer for a mug of coffee and a cryptic crossword while others not needed at that time are socialising. In his own context, he would be going back into the solitude of the desert, to his simple life and his own thoughts. But don't underestimate him, this is a man who clearly understood his mission and was intent on delivering.

Today's gospel reading is one of those scenes without which our film would not really make sense. The gospel is clear – here is a man sent from God not because he is the Messiah but because he will recognise the Messiah when he appears, and there is a real chance that others will not. John is sent from God. And he is clearly setting out both his own role and that of another also sent from God who is coming.

The part from verse 19 onwards reminds me of a sort of reverse game of 'Guess who'. 'Are you Elijah' they ask, 'No', 'Are you a prophet?', 'No'. And then almost in desperation 'well who are you then?' And John explains patiently that he is there to help prepare for and to identify the Messiah when the time comes. He does all this with a deep humility, never pretending to be more than he is

but never losing his sense of purpose. A man who is comfortable in his own skin and 'just gets on with it'.

Why do we need John in the gospel story, in the advent story? This verbal spat with the authorities sets the scene. On the one hand they are eagerly awaiting the Messiah, or the return of Elijah, and on the other they need that Messiah to fit into their idea of what the Messiah will be like. John should fit their image of what a prophet is like, but he starts burbling on about undoing sandals and loses them. This exchange gives such an insight into the view of the authorities – rigid and uncompromising. Everything needs to fit neatly into one of their headings because they see that as the only way to take on the Romans and other oppressors.

But of course John is more identifiable by what he isn't than by what he is. His Father is from a respected family. A priestly family who served in the Jerusalem temple on a regular basis. He would have been expected to follow that line. Instead we find him living a simple life in the desert, following his calling. The Jewish authorities sent their representatives to ask who he was, which tells us he wasn't just someone they felt he could ignore. They were making things difficult for him but he stuck to his task of telling people that there needed to be change. The Messiah was coming but they needed to acknowledge their failings. The Messiah was close but he, John, wasn't even worthy to untie the laces on his sandals. For us a little trip back to Maudy Thursday and the footwashing that was considered so menial Jewish slaves were not expected to do it. John is emphasising the difference in their status.

For us today John provides a clarity about the need for a Messiah who would arrive not on a war horse but who would unite people in a different way – a way of love and generosity. He reminds us of the need for change in our own lives and in the world around us. Importantly he gives us a role model. He knows what he should do and he does it without waver. Those people sent to interrogate him will learn only the truth but he was willing to be challenged. He acts with integrity and honour in a world where both were in short supply. That's some standards to live up to. He even points the way to a simpler life in the desert away from the greater luxury that he was surely brought up with.

Although a desert based life would hardly work today there are so many elements of his life that we could look to translate into our own. The integrity, the humility, sticking to the task even when it is hard. I'm not suggesting that we start eating locusts – well not yet.

I have been trying to imagine John's acceptance speech as he collects his award. He would not be the best dressed man in the room and would probably be shifting from one sandalled foot to the other. But he would speak with a calm authority. Certainly, he would thank his parents, conscious of the events surrounding his birth. But in his humility, he would not lose sight of the fact that his role was only to support. To provide a mind set where people were open to the prospect of change and to be part of it. He would thank God.

It would not be a speech full of jokes and witty asides but a serious discourse about duty, integrity and following the agreed path. He would realise that this was part of his mission, his moment to

speaking, and that he should take it. I am sure that in his humble and selfless way he would take the opportunity to remind his listeners of the importance of acting on God's call when it comes, because in the continuing gospel story we all have a supporting role to play.