

The 3rd Sunday of Advent: Yet more about John the Baptist.
1st Reading: Isaiah 61:1-2+10-11: Exulting for joy in the Lord;
2nd Reading: 1st Thessalonians 5:16-20: Be optimistic...and holy!
Gospel: John 1:6-8+19-28: Puzzled Jewish leaders quiz John the Baptist.

This weekend marks a change of feeling. This Sunday was always called ‘Gaudete’ (“Rejoice!”) Sunday, from the Latin start of the entrance antiphon (Philippians 4:4), where Paul wants us to be optimistic at the nearness of the Lord’s coming. Christmas is only 8 days away this weekend. (Whether that makes us optimistic or desperate, I leave you to judge...) The 2nd reading is from 1st Thessalonians, in which Paul suggests that being ‘holy’ and ‘happy’ are not mutually exclusive: the practical side of a good life should give us a well-rounded personality, and make us content. On the Advent wreath, we light a rose (or pink) candle, to express this hopeful tone. However, I have never used the matching rose (or pink) vestments: they are not my style, I’m afraid.

More seriously, in the 3-year cycle of readings, we stay with John the Baptist for this weekend’s gospel. This Sunday, in “Year B” – usually from St Mark – we divert to the start of St John’s gospel, to hear how the Jewish leaders at least tried to understand what the famous and popular Baptist was all about. They sent messengers from their Jerusalem HQ to interview him. The gospel-writer calls him “a witness to speak for the light”. In the fourth gospel’s odd language, it means that the Baptist was God’s herald to introduce the real means by which God would communicate with us – the “true light”, the “Word”, the perfect revelation – God’s own Son, made flesh in Jesus Christ.

From this story, I shall pick out two ideas that could be useful to us. The first is this: sometimes, we need to ask awkward questions when people have religious authority. John had admitted that he was not the “Christ” (or Messiah) – though many ordinary folks thought he was. He was not the Old Testament prophet Elijah brought back to life (even though Jesus later said that John copied Elijah’s style). Neither was he “the prophet”. (Many Jews felt that the time of the Messiah would be preceded by one of the other great prophets re-appearing). Having been told what he was not, these men from Jerusalem felt entitled to ask John was he WAS. I think they were right to ask this. Remember: this was a tense time, with potentially serious threats to the survival of the Jewish religion in a land occupied by the Romans. Talk of political messiahs and divine intervention terrified the priestly class in Jerusalem: they feared a

Roman intervention that would destroy their religious system. (They were not wrong: this is what happened about forty years later, in AD 70.)

So, these men put John on the spot, and made him reveal what he thought himself to be. The answer was fascinating – and humble. He was the “*voice crying in the wilderness: Make a straight way for the Lord.*” His job was twofold: to introduce the real Messiah to the people, and also to prepare for the Messiah’s arrival by helping the people spiritually with the ceremony of purification – baptism - for the forgiveness of sins. That is all we hear of the interview, so the answer seems to have satisfied the questioners – at least for now. I think those of us who have any religious leadership – parish clergy and other workers, RE teachers at school, bishops and senior church people in public life – need to be willing to answer questions on the beliefs we have, and the roles we play in society. Those men who quizzed John the Baptist were just doing the job they had been given, and their dialogue with John seems fair to me. When I taught RE full-time in the 1970s & 1980’s, I let students ask awkward questions in class. (If any of them are reading this, I trust I did let that happen!) What we cannot do is to silence people with the reply, “Just accept it as a matter of faith”, then add nothing else. That destroys religious belief.

The second point I take from this gospel is the relationship between honesty and humility. Most practising Christians (of any church group) tend to play down their importance, rather than puff themselves up. (As politicians may often do?) Having said he had no super-authority as Elijah, or as the Messiah, John did state with honesty that he was God’s messenger, or herald, with a vital task. In this gospel, the next paragraph (after where this weekend’s bit ends) shows the Baptist fulfilling this role – he introduces Jesus as the “*Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*” – familiar words! This starts the whole process of Jesus’ public life. John does not water down the importance of his job, out of false modesty. Elsewhere, in the “Magnificat” hymn, our Lady says, “*The Almighty has done great things for me; holy is his name.*” (Luke 1:49).

I suggest that this is the correct approach for us too: God can use us - our personality, ability, even our weaknesses - to do his work in the world. There are some whom each one of us can reach individually, but whom no-one else can reach. That is when you and I become a “voice crying in the wilderness” in modern society. Let us not do ourselves down, but admit: yes, we can do things; yes, these abilities are thanks to God’s gifts; yes, we too can be God’s heralds in a non-religious world. Let us not be frightened to give it a try. *Fr Jim Dunne.*

