

## Third Sunday of Advent 13 December 2020

The Vimeo Recording can be found [here](#)

### Gospel

*St John 1.6 – 8, 19 – 28*

There was a man sent from God: his name was John. He came as a witness to give witness to the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to testify to the light.

This is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?". He confessed and did not deny. He confessed: "I am not the Christ." Then they asked him, "Who are you, then? Are you Elijah?". "I am not," he said. "Are you the Prophet?". "No," he replied. They said to him: "Who are you, so we can give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?". He answered: I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Isaiah. "

Those who were sent were of the Pharisees. They questioned him and said to him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?". John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, he who comes after me: to him I am not worthy to untie the thong sandal." This took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

### God's ways are not our ways



You may remember the children's rhyme:

There was a crooked man and he walked a crooked mile,  
He found a crooked sixpence upon a crooked stile.  
He bought a crooked cat, which caught a crooked mouse.  
And they all lived together in a little crooked house.

Everything about him and his environment was crooked. Nothing was straight, or flat, or upright. Everything in the crooked man's life creaked and tottered and meandered; nothing was as it should be, and it was a losing battle to get things as they should be. Villages in Olde England were like that. Not a straight line in the place: dark, low, irregular buildings, odd shaped plots of land, winding streets. It's actually a very good image of how human life grows up, and how we tend to deal with one another. It's not without its beauty; but it's haphazard, full of oddities and anomalies, building bit by bit, reacting to who's poor and who's wealthy, who's powerful and who frankly has nothing to offer.

Paths in old Judea were like that too, and still are in the oldest settlements. Country mile after country mile of winding roads and paths crisscrossing the hills and rocky deserts around the great city of Jerusalem, roads and herding tracks that make their way round the landscape, forever negotiating obstacles making strange turns, respectfully skirting the properties of the rich, fearfully avoiding the settlements of the enemy.

It was into such an environment that we're told the people of the Judean countryside flocked, to hear John the Baptist, and be baptized as preparation for the coming of God. And into all this religious activity the Pharisees sent some messengers on a kind of fact-finding mission to John, to ask him, 'Who are you?' He looked like a prophet, sounded like a prophet, and behaved like a prophet: but what *sort* of prophet? What was his message? If he was real and his message was credible, the religious guardians of the people would understand – and know.

And John answered very simply: 'I am *not* the Messiah, the Christ we all expect. ... I am *not* Elijah prophesied by Malachi (cf. Mal 3:23) ... I am *not* that Prophet, promised by Moses and like him (cf. Dt 18:15). So then what are you? they pressed. What do you say about yourself? What is your identity? 'I am just a voice', he said, 'a voice for someone else; I speak a word about someone else.' Just as our gospel reading said, 'A man sent from God, to give evidence about a light – an utterly *new* light – that was coming into the world.' And he quotes that wonderful text from Isaiah: Make straight the way of the Lord.' (Is 40.3) You remember the wonderful aria from Messiah beloved not only of tenors:

Ev'ry valley shall be exalted,  
and ev'ry mountain and hill made low;  
the crooked straight, and the rough places plain. (Is 40.4)

Change is on the way! The poor people are going to be put on the top of the pile; the rich people put on the bottom of the pile. This a revolution and it's a world without end. There has never been a 'change message' as big as John the Baptist's. Remember, John is using the mountainous desert around him, where the paths are better for herds of goats than crowds of humans, to strengthen his proclamation. Everything in the old world – the world we know, the world we've made, the world we inhabit with all its crookednesses, uneasy negotiations, injustices, its lies and its struggles for peace – will be transformed. Why? because God is coming; and God is not like us. *God is not like us*. God is light, and light isn't crooked. Light travels in straight lines, it heads straight for its target.

To use another image, a motorway (something every bishop of Ebbsfleet knows a lot about). Like a great gash across the map motorways sweep past all our homes. Motorways don't care what they meet; hills, valleys, towns, estuaries. That's what's God's love is like: like a motorway – sweeping straight through human lives; like light – heading straight to its target. You see, God's love is *much less careful* than we are. It doesn't care about obstacles, how important and rich, unimportant and poor we are. *It wants its target*. And all those negotiating points of ours – the way we distinguish friends from foes, good from bad, being diplomatic or candid, reserved or intimate, who's a friend and who'd stab us in the back as soon as look at us – *none of that counts with God*. He cuts straight through. He couldn't care less if we're saints or sinners. His love is smooth and swift and easy; a road with no exits; and it goes straight to its destination – your heart and my heart.

And while this may be difficult, and potentially extremely unnerving stuff: we are asked to *greet this message with joy*. That's what this Sunday is about. Gaudete Sunday, rejoicing Sunday, it's called. That doesn't mean it's a break in an otherwise drab and rather kill-joy run up to Christmas; but a reminder that *God's way is not our way*, and though that idea may seem threatening and dangerous, it is actually a cause of great liberation and unbounded joy!!

You see God did not make a world, watch it turn sinful, and react in character by being compassionate and sending his son to put everything right. That's our crooked version of the story. True to form it puts us at the centre of the story. In our hands the story of God's love, gets made into a story all about *us*! We say God *adapts* his reactions to suit good people who he approves of, and bad people who he doesn't approve of. We think you have to be good *before* God is ready to love you; and that you have to repent *before* God is ready to forgive you. But, dear friends, God's ways are not our ways. It's the other way round: God loves you, *therefore* you can do good; God forgives you, *therefore* you are absolved. The love, the mercy, the new heart, the justice and peace, the joy in the Spirit: they're all God's gifts, they're *not* your earnings!

However, we each have to be willing to do one thing, as John the Baptist taught: *you* have to take the *risk of believing, of trusting*. You have to choose, will you take the crooked mile or the motorway? You have to decide,

either to stay as you are or turn to look at God and let God's love do its work. The risk is being ready to be changed; ready for all your security to crumble; to let go of your faith in yourself and the securities you have lovingly built up, and put your trust in God. And *of course* that is a frightening prospect. Motorways are not kind to the countryside as they slice across the land and through the cities; God's love can do frightening and terrible things to human lives. Who knows?! it might even make you patient, kind, good, faithful, self-controlled.

'There is', said John, 'one who's coming after me; he's more than I am. I am not worthy to loosen his shoes for him. I'm just a voice telling you to prepare to meet him.' In his life you will see what astonishing things happen when someone trusts in God's ways *not* human ways; when someone chooses the motorway *not* the country mile. You will see in his life what great and terrifying things God's love can do when a person is willing to take the risk, as Jesus did, of being loved and sustained and directed by God.

*Only* this newness can break the circle of human ideas and habits and sins. And that is why the answer to all our Advent hunger and hope and desire is the Incarnate Word of life given at Christmas. In his life our hunger *is met*, our desire for love and truth *is answered*, we *are* talked and touched into new and everlasting life; but only if we let God reach us through him.

You may like to listen to this Orlando Gibbons anthem <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a9pE5vrgBHQ>