

Sermon, Advent 3 Yr B - St James, All Saints, St Johns - Online

John 1: 6-8, 19-28

13 Dec 2020



Many years ago I found myself in Court!On voluntary work experience pre-University. One of the cases involved theft from a vending machine in a nightclub.

This particular vending machine was up a flight of stairs on a landing, and it had been broken into and cash stolen. The defendant claimed he did not do it, that there were so many people in the club, how could anyone really know who it was. All remained unclear until a witness was called - the nightclub bouncer. The bouncer explained that upstairs had been cordoned off and was dark, and that he'd followed the defendant up the stairs only to find him kicking the vending machine with some vigour to get at the cash. The point is this: a witness' evidence can be crucial in determining the truth. In our Bible passage today, we also meet a man who is called as a witness to testify to the truth. We saw last week how the Jews around Jerusalem were all astir following the arrival of a new prophet, after a gap of many centuries without prophetic ministry. This was John the Baptist, and the Jewish leaders bring him in for questioning. They cut to the chase: Is he Elijah

or Isaiah, one of their ancient prophets returned? (v20) John is equally direct in his response: He is neither Elijah nor Isaiah (v21). Who are you then, the leaders demand? Is he the Messiah, the one long hoped for? (v22). They are searching for the truth, and asking John to bear witness. In the nightclub vending machine case, the witness' testimony was crucial in determining the truth. The truth is a sort of light, that illuminates the grey and the dark, and helps us see things as they really are. Clearly John is charismatic, he preaches a message of challenge and hope and does things that remind people of their great prophets of long ago. So, is John the Messiah? Netflix has a fictional drama series called 'Messiah', and it explores what it would be like if a Messiah-like figure turned up in modern day. In the series, a CIA agent relentlessly pursues the truth about a man who leads Muslim refugees to safety and whom they call Imam. This 'Imam' also miraculously heals a Jewish boy at the site of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem; then suddenly appears in America to work alongside a pastor of an impoverished Baptist church, whilst shunning a Megachurch. Is he the Messiah for all faiths? It is a fascinating imagining of what it might be like if a messiah-figure came in our modern times, and perhaps not unlike the feelings that must have existed around the time of John and the advent of Jesus Christ. They needed to know the truth. But the truth whilst liberating can also be disconcerting. Winston Churchill once said '*Men occasionally stumble over the truth, but most of them pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing had happened*'. This issue is this: Once you know the truth, what are you going to do about it? And this is the situation the Jewish leaders find

themselves in, because in v20, John the Baptist is clear: 'I am not the Christ'. He is not the Messiah. He goes on to tell them 'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord....I baptise you with water, but He who is to come I am not worthy even to untie his sandals' (v23,27). Now a disciple would not untie sandals of their teacher, it would be a servant Bible times. Old Testament prophets considered themselves servants of God, but John is saying he is not worthy of even being The Messiah's servant.

So where does all this leave us? In our season of Advent and through this reading from John's gospel, we're reminded of two aspects of our role as Christ's followers. The first aspect is to be *witnesses* to the truth. John's Gospel has the word 'witness' in it 47 times, compared to about five in all Matthew, Mark and Luke put together (source: NIV Study Bible). So being a witness is something that both John our Gospel writer and John the Baptist wanted to emphasise. Confusingly they have the same name but they are not the same person! v5 tells us the reason John the Baptist came was 'as a witness to testify concerning the Light....so that through him all might believe'. Because the truth, as Jesus said, will set people free. Jesus also said to his followers: '*you are my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and to the end of the Earth*' (Acts 1:8) We must always be ready to give a reason for our faith when asked, whether by neighbour, friend or family, to speak about the hope that we have been given. Sometimes this might even mean we are persecuted for our faith, as this week's Beatitudes study prompts us to consider: 'Blessed are those who suffer persecution for righteousness'

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sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'. We pray for our Christian brothers and sisters in other countries, who speak the truth are persecuted for doing so.



The second aspect we see through John's example is the need for *humility*. In a world where many never miss an opportunity to shout about their achievements or pursue celebrity or status or wealth, we see through John's example that in God's kingdom, the '*first shall be last and the last shall be first*'.

And at a time when many remain sceptical about the church as an institution, *humility* and *witness* suggest we may need to preach less and instead live out practically what it means to love, even when the temptation through the pandemic is to focus primarily on ourselves. And through the COVID pandemic we've seen many examples of what a faithful Christian witness can look like, without words. Humility in itself is also a form of witness, because we offer a contrast with a celebrity seeking culture, and point to a greater truth: the peace of and joy of Christ who came at Christmas.