

Sermon, Third Sunday in Advent

York, 17th December, 2023

John the Baptist's ministry had caused such a stir that a delegation from the Jewish ruling authorities had come to question him. Who is this man who eats locusts and wild honey, standing at the desert looking like Elijah of old, dressed in camel-haired garments with a leather belt around his waist? As Elijah had been taken to heaven before he had died, the Jews expected him to come again as the forerunner to the Messiah. Therefore, could this be Elijah, standing there on the banks of the Jordan? Therefore, they ask: "Who are you then? Elijah?" John answers: "I am not." If not Elijah then perhaps he is another prophet, such as Moses, promised long ago in the Eighteenth Chapter of the Book of Deuteronomy, so they ask: "Are you the Prophet?" "No." "Who are you", they said, "that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?"

John the Baptist is one of the most significant people in the New Testament. He is a key figure in God's work of salvation, promised back in the Old Testament, who was sent by God as a witness to the Light who was coming into the world. The whole purpose of John the Baptist's ministry is to bear witness to Jesus. Throughout our text today the point is repeatedly made that John is not the Light; not the Messiah promised from God, but his role is simply to testify to him: "This man came as a witness to testify concerning the Light, that everyone may believe through him. He was not that light but came to testify concerning the Light" (Verses 7 & 8).

John is very clear about whom he is not. He is not the Christ. He is not Elijah, or a special prophet. He knows that he is just John. He doesn't answer them by saying: "I'm John the Baptist" or "I have this special ministry." Here we have an insight into a most profound model of humility. He doesn't highlight anything about himself; in fact, he does the opposite. John says: "I baptise with water but another stands among you whom you do not know, the One coming after me whom I am not worthy to unbind the strap of his sandal."

When you untie someone else's shoelaces or buckles, you bend down to do it. There at ground level—sandal level—it is physically and practically impossible for anyone to bow any lower. John says he's not even worthy to be in this position before Jesus; to bow before him; to stoop to the lowest place a human being possibly can and render this most basic of service—helping untie a sandal. Thus, John the Baptist's confession of faith is not only a confession of faith about who Jesus is; it is a confession of faith about *whom he is too*. He is not worthy; he is a sinner just like

those to whom he preached repentance. After today's text, in Chapter 3 Verse 30, John would say of Jesus, and of himself: "He must become greater; I must become less."

John's baptism of repentance is God's work. He is the one who goes to work in our hearts through his word. Turning to Jesus with our sins for him to take them away can only come after he has first washed and re-created our hearts. John shows us what that turning looks like; it looks like bowing, stooping. That kind of posture is hard, and it hurts our pride much more than it hurts our knees. Yet, it is one of the greatest witnesses we can give, and we can only do that when Christ is at work, bringing change at the deepest level within us. We can only kneel repentantly before God and others when Christ has made our heart his manger and he increases in us, shining his light, making us less, freeing us from the sin of human self-preoccupation and self-absorption. When Christ goes to work in us, we are able to acknowledge that he, the Saviour of the world, is the Saviour we need too. We are able to join with John the Baptist's confession of Christ and ourselves, that we are not worthy in even the lowest position before the Christ, and that "He must become greater, I must become less."

These religious leaders who come to John the Baptist don't know God. If they did, they wouldn't be asking John about his identity and why he is baptising. "What do you have to say about yourself?" they ask John, and John reveals his identity to them by pointing to the Scriptures: "I am the voice crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord'". He is the one promised by God from of old to prepare the way for their Saviour. Yet even now the One who John announces is coming after him, *stands among them*: "I baptise with water," John said, "but another stands among you who you do not know, the One coming after me who I am not worthy to unbind the strap of his sandal" (v27).

The readings for Advent began with a reading from Chapter 64 of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah: "Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down!" We could read that as "God why won't you do something!" Today, on the Sunday of Advent with the theme of joy, our text leads us to rejoice that he has! God did rend the heavens and come down in the person of Christ, coming to the world as its Saviour. The Christian faith also cherishes God's own promise in the Scriptures that he will come again soon, coming on the clouds of heaven to take his faithful people to share in his glory forever. What joy that will be, to finally be with our Lord in glory, free from our sinful body and free from all pain and anguish, all anxiety and trouble, and only unending paradise.

God came to earth at that first Christmas to be born in a manger for us. Then he came for us with all his grace and favour and his own promise in connection with baptism: “Lo I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Not just the end of your life in the world—but the very end of time as the last day turns into the new, unending day and the Lord of Light will shine before you forever.

He is with us each day. He is with us today—here, now. In the words of John the Baptist, another stands among us. The difference between us and the religious leaders who confronted John is that we *do* know the one whose sandals we are not worthy to untie. *He* is the Pastor of his church, the great shepherd of our souls. He stood among us when he baptised us with the Holy Spirit and joined us with his death and resurrection and washed away all our sin. He stands among us with his divine grace and favour for us, as we kneel by his sandals for him to forgive us all our sin, freeing us to stand with joy in his presence. He stands among us as we stand to listen to him speak his gospel. He stands among us as we pray. He stands among us to preach to us that he is the Good News from God. He stands among us to serve us his precious body and blood he shed on the Cross, where he, the worthy One gave to us personally in his holy meal the forgiveness, life and salvation he won for all people. He stands among us and lifts up his hands to bless us to bear witness to him and shine his light in a dark world.

God is ever present and doing something in the world today. He visits those we come across. He serves through our hands. He encourages through our encouragement. He loves in the love we show. He intercedes for those we pray for. He shines his light through us to overcome the darkness of despair in the world around, as we share the reason for the hope we have—that Light of Light, true God of true God, has come into the world to redeem sinners and call them in the service of his kingdom. One might surely ask “What greater joy could there be?”