

I was talking with my daughter Anna over lunch a couple of weeks ago and she mentioned that the following week her friend Ruth was coming to see her. "I remember Ruth," I said. What I remembered was the first time I met her. We were on holiday in Spain and Anna's friend Ruth was coming to join us. I was deputed to go to the station in Figueres to fetch her. Now that may sound easy but I had never seen her before nor she me and there is a limit to how many 19 year old girls a man can approach without being arrested.

So I stood there looking at various girls, which in itself is not a good idea, thinking "is this her"? Eventually there was one girl left on the platform wrestling with a large rucksack and I was pretty confident that the signs were right and this was the young lady I'd come to collect. She was the one.

As we read this passage from John's gospel on this 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Advent, when the focus is on John the Baptist, we get a similar sense of people looking for someone but not sure who.

V19 sees, in a sense, the beginning of the gospel because the first 18 verses are like a prologue and now we begin to unpack who is this one who has come into the world. In so doing we begin with John the Baptist and this key question "who is he".

As we read the passage we see that various people had been sent out to John to ask the question as to who he was.

So who was John?

Well John begins to be

**defined by who he wasn't.**

So in v20 he was upfront about the fact that he was **not the Christ**. From that it is clear what the questioners were after. They were looking for the Christ and John makes them aware it is not him.

Again in v21 when they asked "are you Elijah", he answered in the negative. **He was not Elijah**. Malachi centuries before had prophesied, "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes." But John himself did not make that claim, though the angel Gabriel in announcing John's birth to his father Zechariah said " he will go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17).

So the next question was, are you the prophet, that is the prophet like Moses who was promised in Deut 18:15-18, who would come and speak the word of the Lord. Again the answer was no, **not the prophet**, though again John did speak the word of the Lord as he called people to repent.

So if John was not the Christ, nor Elijah nor the prophet we are still left with the question who was he?

I don't know whether you read in the press in November how members of Dover Town Council in Kent were duped into believing that a guy who constantly said "call me Graham" was Francis Rossi a member of Status Quo the rock band. The man spent the day enjoying the hospitality of the town's mayor before his secret was found out. The fact that he looked nothing like Francis Rossi and kept saying "call me Graham" should have given the game away.

Well here after John had said who he wasn't they are still left with the question but

**who is he?**

However what he says gives the game away.

In these verses we see two things that he said about himself.

**The first was that he was a voice.**

He was a messenger but not just any messenger for he identified himself with the messenger mentioned in the prophecy of Isaiah. The specific reference is to the voice calling for the levelling of the ground to allow the people of God to return from exile. But the reference is wider than that for in Isaiah we see the prophecy of the coming of a saviour who would bear the sins of his people and the climax of a new heaven and new earth. It is this voice that is John who cried out in the desert preparing a way for the coming of Jesus the Messiah who would suffer and die.

He is the voice. His main function was to point people to Jesus.

I am not boasting but I am now the proud possessor of not one but two pairs of glasses. Actually let's strike the word proud from that. I have two pairs of glasses. One helps me see things around me when I'm driving and the other is meant to help me see the words when I'm reading. The glasses have one main function and it's not to make me look intelligent. They are there to help me see. John had this one main function and that was to help people see, see who Jesus is.

We may feel that's a shame for John playing second fiddle to Jesus but the very fact that we remember him and are thinking about him this morning shows how important his role was. He was the lens through whom others were helped to see Jesus, the signpost pointing to the one who was to come.

His was a unique role in that through his voice he focussed not on himself but spoke of the one to come and pointed people to Jesus.

Most mornings just for a few minutes while having breakfast I listen to the Terry Wogan show on Radio Two and every so often he'll

read out a letter followed by the words "me, me, me, me". That's how it is isn't? So much of what we say is about me, even with those of us who are quite shy and retiring. But here John turns the spotlight right away from himself and onto Jesus. Surely as followers of Jesus that is what we are called to do. We are to be the voice that points people to Jesus.

I was chatting with my brothers at a wedding a couple of weeks ago and something related to driving came up and one of them told a story and I said something about a friend of mine that had experienced a similar mishap. It was natural to talk about my friend. However to talk about my friend Jesus....well that is a different matter isn't it? And yet, as with John, he is the one we should be pointing people to. Who is it that we are asking God to give us the opportunities to speak to and point them to Jesus? To whom will we be the voice in the wilderness of this world and speak of a Saviour?

### **The second was that he was the baptiser.**

Then the second thing he said about himself was that he was the baptiser, v26 "I baptize with water". John said it to point out that he was nothing compared to the one who would come and baptise with the Holy Spirit. However we should not simply pass over how he described himself - "I am the baptiser".

It was not just through words but through action that John was the lens through which people were to see Jesus, it was also through his baptising. John's baptism was very symbolic. People came away from their normal lives out into the wilderness where he was. They separated themselves of from the norm, from the past and from what was going on in society. They were baptised with all its symbolism of cleansing. In the baptism they were submitting to God and his will and then went back to their everyday lives to live and work as God's children.

In all this John was, we could say, actually stirring things up. The whole baptism event, with its emphasis upon repentance, brought to the fore the fact that all was not well among the people of God and it created a divide between those who saw that and those who refused to accept it. It caused some to reject him but with others it created an atmosphere of spiritual hunger and desire into which Jesus could step as the saviour.

I'm not saying that people, having been baptised, returned to their homes and realised that the baptism itself made little difference and longed for something more which was fulfilled in Jesus. Rather the whole event created a situation in which the spiritual life of God's people was being questioned and in which dissatisfaction was being revealed which only the Messiah could satisfy.

We see it in a different way in films where often the baddies create a situation that can only be solved by the appearance of the hero be he Superman, Batman or whoever. The crisis is beyond that of the normal authorities to deal with so out goes the call for superman. John was no baddie but his action, through his baptism, created the situation that cried out for a saviour.

Again we need to see the uniqueness of this action but also we need to ask questions about it in terms of ourselves. John's life as well as his words created a stir. Here was one who was given at birth to God, whose whole life was committed to God and whose life had a great effect on others. It raised questions for people.

Now again I know he was unique and I certainly have no desire to wander round wearing a camel hair coat and eating locusts and honey, but he did make people think and he divided opinion about him and his message. I know very well that I am not like that. I know that so often my life is lived just the same as everyone else. It won't create an atmosphere in which people are opened up to Jesus. Now I realise in saying this that we are not to make a show of our religion, of our praying, giving or fasting but let me take as an example our use of money.

It is so easy to view money as ours, something we have earned and will spend as we wish. Yes we may set aside some for God but the most we will set aside for ourselves. We will spend it in very similar ways to those who know nothing of Christ and his sacrifice for us, in ways that does not seek first the kingdom of God, in ways that brings us pleasure while often ignoring the needs of others. Friends I say this because this is where I am at and as I think of it I recognise that my life in this area is far from what God would want and so it doesn't disturb people around me as John's life disturbed them.

Over the years I have met many people whose attitude to money and possessions have really challenged me and who have, without show, raised issues with others. Why do they live in that way? Why do they seem to do without things for the sake of the gospel? How can they just give that car, bike, book or whatever away?

Can you see what I'm saying where the actions of someone creates questions the answers to which lead to Jesus?

Do you remember when Rolf Harris would be doing a painting he'd ask, "can you see what it is yet?"

With John the issue for the people and especially the religious authorities was "can you see who he is yet?" Not the Christ, nor Elijah nor the prophet but the lens through whom people would see Jesus the signpost whose words and life pointed people to the one who would come to save us from our sins.

The challenge for us in our own day is to live lives that create the question, "why" and then to speak the answer, "because of Jesus."