

The Third Sunday of Advent 2011 – Witnesses to the Christ Among Us

In case it's all a great mystery to you, or you just don't care, let me remind you that the readings we use every Sunday morning come from a three year cycle of readings we call years A, B and C. We're in Year B right now, but whether it's A, B or C every year on the second and third Sundays of Advent we hear about the same person, the man we usually call John the Baptist, which is particularly appropriate on this third Sunday of Advent I guess as we are celebrating a baptism.

John the Baptist, we know a bit about him. We know he was related to Jesus in a roundabout kind of way, we know he came from a priestly family, his father served in the Temple in Jerusalem, and we know that while we call him John the Baptist baptising wasn't really his primary job at all. In the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, John's primary calling is to be a forerunner of the Messiah – "Prepare ye the way", we all know how that goes. In those three gospels John is the guy who shows up ahead of Jesus.

It reminds me of a memory that stands out from my childhood. Between about five and ten my family lived on State Highway 1 in Waikanae, so just about anyone driving between Wellington and almost anywhere else drove past our house. I have this vivid memory of a day when a particular group of people drove past. This was the early to mid-seventies and some of you who were living up here especially should remember Bruno Lawrence's Electric Revelation and Travelling Apparition, more commonly known as Blerta. They were based in Waimarama, and they travelled the country in three converted Bedford buses, and one day those three buses passed my house in Waikanae. I remember it because on the first was painted 'Blerta is Coming', on the second 'Blerta is here' and on the third, 'Blerta has gone'.

In Matthew, Mark and Luke John is the first bus; 'Get ready, the Messiah is coming', that was his job. In the fourth gospel, however, things are different. The Gospel of John is named after a different John but the first John to show up in John is John, who in the other gospels is the Baptist, but in this one is someone else entirely.

What we always need to remember about John's gospel is that it's different. That much is obvious of course, but what makes it different is that it comes at the gospel story from a very different angle to the others. Matthew, Mark and Luke all have their unique points, but they all follow the same basic narrative arch – that is, they all focus mostly on what happened. John, though, isn't so much interested in what happened – John still tells us what happened of course, albeit via some quite different stories than the others – but what John's mainly interested in isn't what happened, but what it means. Matthew, Mark and Luke all say this is who Jesus was and what he did, but John says this is what all that meant. Hence why things are different in John, the stories are different, the things Jesus says are different, the order of events is different, and John the Baptist is different, most particularly because he isn't really John the Baptist.

It's the same man of course, and he still does a bit of baptising, but this isn't the camel-hair wearing, locust and wild honey eating, fire and brimstone preaching John in the wilderness, this is a different John entirely.

One of the things that leaps out at me about John in the fourth gospel is the way he's initially defined by what he's not. 'Who are you?' they asked. 'I am not the Messiah, I am not Elijah, I am not the prophet'. So that tells us who you're not, what about who you are?

"There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him."

'He came as a witness.' If you want to know who John was in the fourth gospel, this is it. He is not John the Baptist baptizing in the wilderness. He is John the Witness and his first, foremost and primary reason for being is to bear witness to Jesus. Not just the Jesus who is the messiah to come – that's John the Baptist, the forerunner – but rather the Jesus who is the Christ who is already here.

"They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know".

In this gospel John is the one who bears witness to the Christ among them. John says 'the Messiah is here' – in this gospel John is the second bus.

In John's gospel John is the first person to identify Jesus as the Son of God. In Matthew, Mark and Luke that happens way later in the story, but here it's right up front, chapter one, just after the verses we've heard this morning: "The next day he saw Jesus coming towards him and declared, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world". And it's a role John continues right through the first half of the gospel – bearing witness to the Christ among them. It's John's place in this gospel, to bear witness, and in doing so John defines Jesus – "this is the Son of God" – and it's that role, that calling, that in turn defines John.

St Gregory the Great was the 7th century pope who put the finishing touches on this season of Advent we're in right now. Gregory said that all Christians should be like John, and point out the presence of Christ in the world. Our calling, he said, our primary task, is to point out the Jesus who stands among us.

That's what it's all about. This mission, this life that we claim at our baptisms, this is what it calls us to do; to bear witness to Christ in our world, and that's by no means as simple as it might sound.

It doesn't matter which gospel you read, John doesn't get an easy ride. The authorities hate him, he ends up in prison and eventually dead, and along the way he even doubts that he's done the right thing at all. Thomas Merton, the great 20th century religious writer, said that John's identification of Jesus at the Jordan was "a moment of fulfilment, which gave meaning to his whole life. But John also had to witness to Christ in prison, in the face of death, in failure." Being a witness might not sound like much of a job, but it certainly isn't easy.

As we approach Christmas, as we prepare once more to remember the Bethlehem story, with the shepherds and the angels and the baby in the manger, these few weeks remind us that the Bethlehem story isn't what we're called to bear witness to. For us and for all the baptised Christmas isn't just a time to remember the Jesus who came as a baby; it's a challenge and a calling to testify to the Christ who is with us now – real in the world of today just as in the stories of the past. Our task is to bear witness to the Christ who is among us in the streets of our cities and on our farms, the Christ who is among the starving of Africa and the violence of Afghanistan. We are they who should bear witness to the Christ who stands with those facing hardship, and danger, and fear, and loneliness; the Christ who stands in the world as it is and not just as it might be.

That is the calling of Advent and the life of our baptism – to be as John was, the one who points to the one who is; John the Baptist, John the Pointer, John the road-straightener, but most importantly, John the Witness.

“He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.” May the same be said of us all. Amen.