

Advent 3

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 13 December 2020

Readings: Isaiah 61 vv 1-4 & 8-end and John 1 vv 6-8 & 19-28

The rise of the 'celebrity' is one of the fascinating developments of our age.

Recent years have seen an increasing media focus on people who are famous and even role models for the young, not necessarily because of what they have done, not just because of their achievements (although some may have had successful careers in sport or entertainment) but because they have attracted attention and end up being famous because of their connection with somebody who has a significant achievement or position, because of the way they use their wealth or even because of their notoriety. It's a dangerous occupation: those whom the media builds up as celebrities can all too easily be knocked down.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that we see some elements of this in modern political life, but that's another story and something from which we are mercifully free in Guernsey.

Celebrity, that fickle media concept, is the exact opposite to everything that John the Baptist stood for.

Last week, we were introduced once more to John the Baptist, in the words of St Mark. The second introduction to John the Baptist focuses on the statement in John 1.7, 'he came as a witness'. John sees himself simply as a Voice, crying out in the wilderness, bearing testimony to the Light. We are paradoxical creatures, we human beings. On the one hand, we think that we are wonderfully valuable - we must be, or the Son of God would not have thought us worth dying for. On the other hand, however, we think that we don't exist for ourselves, and that our value lies in what we may be and do for others, not for ourselves.

John shows us this paradox. On the one hand he was clearly a powerful, even unique, human being. He prompted a high-level delegation from Jerusalem to investigate him, the members of which clearly expected him to make dramatic claims for himself (at least 'Elijah', or 'the prophet', if not 'the Christ'!). Jesus himself commented that 'among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist'. Greater than Abraham, Moses and Elijah. John was great indeed.

On the other hand, however, he was only a Voice, bearing witness to Someone Else. His whole *raison d'être* on this earth is summed up in the statement, 'he came to testify to the light'. The apostle Paul says something very similar in the Acts of the Apostles, summing up his own life as he speaks to the elders of the Church in Ephesus: 'I do not count my life of any value to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God's grace.'

We live in a culture which rightly prizes 'self-expression' and 'self-realisation', whilst making idols of those who are particularly successful in achieving this in certain fields, whether in business, or sport, or music, or on stage or screen. They 'arrive', somehow, as people, along with the recording contract, the house in the country or their first million. In some ways, John the Baptist can be described as such a person - mobbed by thousands who travelled for days on foot to hear him speak and be baptized by him. He could have developed a cult following amounting to a mass movement; but he refused.

Instead, he pointed away from himself to 'the one who is coming after me', whose shoe laces he is not worthy to untie. Are we ready to be like that? To give up our autonomy and our desire for self-realisation, instead to see ourselves as wholly 'there' for others, for Another, for the Christ who is the Light of the world?

One of the questions that Christians find themselves asking is, *'What would Jesus do?'*

It can be a risky business to claim that what we do is just what Jesus would have done in the same circumstances. But one of the things that Jesus *did* was to found a Church. For all its failings, and they are many, the institution of the Church is inseparable from the teachings of its founder. It is fashionable to decry institutions, but an institution – be it a church or a family, a sports club or whatever – is simply a set of people who pledge to be faithful to one another, to nurture and sustain relationships, in pursuit of a common good. The alternative to institutions is isolation. As a community we have rejected that this year as we have proclaimed #GuernseyTogether. And any attempt to share a common life requires some kind of organisation and structure.

And our calling is to model in our generation what John did in his day. Like John, we are to be light in the darkness of the world. We are not to make foolish statements about our power or our rights. That is not John's way. It should not be ours. We are to signpost people who are struggling in the darkness to the light of hope that is Jesus. This life of service and love may not be glamorous; it is indeed different to the transient celebrity of our own age. But it is our calling as it was John's.

This is an Advent Prayer from New Guinea:

Lord God, oil the hinges of our hearts' doors, that they may swing gently and easily to welcome your coming.

We can extend this prayer to a petition that our church doors may swing gently and easily to welcome all who, whether or not they know it, are looking for the light that is Jesus.