



## Revd Ro's Reflection on Second Sunday of Epiphany

### Year A

1 Corinthians 1.1-9

John 1.29-42

Last Sunday I chose to look at the wonderful opening to St. John's gospel. There he gives us the fact that Jesus Christ, 'the word' is co-creator with God, with him yet separate from him. He tells of the incarnation, and as he does so, right in the middle of this phenomenal passage is a human being, the one whom Jesus calls the greatest of all mortals,

<sup>6</sup> 'There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup>He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup>He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. <sup>9</sup>The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.'

St. John's gospel does not actually describe the baptism of Jesus. John the Baptist, we are told in the passage that follows, was baptising close to Bethany, the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

Bethany is only a couple of miles south-west of Jerusalem. He was demanding that people repent of their sins, be baptised in the Jordan and turn to God once more. Thousands were flocking to him. This was causing a rumpus. Who was this man who dressed in a tunic of camel's hair who was acting like a prophet? Anyone like this was an upstart and a possible threat to the ruling power base because he was influencing the people. So of course the next we hear in St. John's gospel is that the Baptist receives a deputation from the powers that be.

<sup>19</sup> 'This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' <sup>20</sup>He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, 'I am not the Messiah.'

The first thing to notice is that John the Baptist has the humility of true greatness, 'I am not the Messiah.' From his birth, foretold by the angel, he was a special child. At the visit of Mary to his mother Elizabeth, the unborn child John, 'leapt' in her womb because Mary was the God bearer and he sensed the Messiah's presence. Now, on the banks of the Jordan, the adult John, just a little older than Jesus, is carrying out his mission, God's mission, to tell of the coming King. Naturally the Priests and Levites know that before the coming of the Messiah, Elijah was said to appear or a great prophet like Moses.

‘Are you Elijah?’ He said, ‘I am not.’ ‘Are you the prophet?’ He answered, ‘No.’<sup>22</sup> Then they said to him, ‘Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?’ The powers that be, sects like the Pharisees who hold the power, want an answer and they get it. John has no doubt of his mission, no doubt at all and he quotes the prophecy, ‘I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, “Make straight the way of the Lord”’, as the prophet Isaiah said.

Yes, he the herald, he is a voice ‘crying aloud.’ But he is a human being and a tough and courageous one. Sometimes biblical figures are in danger of being thought of only according to their function in our minds. Denise Levertov puts this so well in her poem, ‘Annunciation’ as she speaks of Mary, ‘But we are told of meek obedience. No one mentions courage.’

John stands alone, sure of his mission, telling of the coming of the Messiah, the King who would set his people free. That is a courageous thing to do. Even now, before the baptism, before Jesus begins his three year mission, the clouds of danger are looming. These priests and co want to report to the Jewish hierarchy just what is going on and they are not going to like John’s answer. Like all on a mission John does not suffer fools gladly, he recognises hypocrisy and sin when he sees it, in fact in St. Matthew’s gospel he calls the Pharisees, ‘You vipers brood!’ Now he answers the challenge clearly,

‘Why then are you baptising if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?’<sup>26</sup> John answered them, ‘I baptise with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know,<sup>27</sup> the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.’<sup>28</sup> This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptising.’

So the stage is set for today’s reading and it follows on from this passage, in fact St. John states that it was the very next day, so John the Baptist’s words are fulfilled.

<sup>29</sup> ‘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!’<sup>30</sup> This is he of whom I said, “After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.”

The recognition is instant, but here in John’s gospel we are not told of the baptism itself, in Matthew ch3 we are and it is described thus,

<sup>16</sup> And when Jesus had been baptised, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.

<sup>17</sup> And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’

It is exactly the same in Mark and Luke, John’s is different because he describes this as a vision John the Baptist saw which enabled him to recognise Jesus as the Messiah when he sees him.

<sup>31</sup> ‘I myself did not know him; but I came baptising with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.’<sup>32</sup> And John testified, ‘I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.’<sup>33</sup> I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptise with water said to me, “He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptises with the Holy Spirit.”<sup>34</sup> And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.’

I think when reading this passage it is important we put ourselves in the position of those who originally heard it. John the Baptist is the herald of the Messiah, the King, the one destined to set his people free from oppression. To any Jew that would mean the overthrow of hated Romans. Maybe the Messiah was to be a warrior who would lead them to victory as his forefather David had done, Israel would be great again. Of course they had a lot to learn about this Messiah’s greatness which

was founded on goodness, humility, love and obedience to God. Not only this, but St. John has begun his gospel with these words.

<sup>1,1</sup> 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup>He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup> All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.'

Jesus Christ is indeed Messiah but he is also co-creator, God and man, fully human and divine at his incarnation. This they must learn and understand. John the Baptist himself says,

'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'

Often therefore, pictures or statues of John the Baptist will have the depiction of a lamb, as indeed with the statue of John the Baptist outside the Roman Catholic Church in Tamworth. This takes us back to the exodus when the Passover lambs were slaughtered and their blood was spread on the doorposts and lintels so that the Israelites were spared. The blood of the lambs saved the people. Forward to the end of Jesus' life, in St. John's gospel Jesus is dying on the cross as the Passover lambs are being slaughtered. Jesus is the 'Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world,' who wins salvation not just for the Jews but all humanity, by his blood shed on the cross. This was the next thing the Jews had to understand yet so few accepted him,

<sup>11</sup> 'He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. <sup>12</sup> But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,'

St. Paul, who met his Lord on the Damascus Road, saw himself as the apostle to the Gentiles as he took God's word to all the people. John the Baptist had his own disciples as we see in today's reading. But as ever John does not seek to cling on to anything or anyone, Jesus is his Lord and King, and so,

<sup>35</sup> 'The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, <sup>36</sup> and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!' <sup>37</sup>The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.'

These are simple words but so profound. These men simply left John and followed Jesus. John is basically saying 'Look here is the Messiah,' and so they follow. No doubt they feel trepidation just as we would in the presence of a great person. They do not speak, they just follow, and it is Jesus who takes the initiative. They think they are going to Jesus but just as much he is calling them. Any relationship is a two way thing. Jesus calls us and every person but we have to turn to him. Jesus' first words are strange in that he does not say, 'who' but 'what',

<sup>38</sup> 'When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, 'What are you looking for?'

That in itself holds a wealth of meaning, they have been following John, the man of God who pointed the way to the Messiah, now John has pointed them to Jesus and they follow but not simply the man but the Saviour, the one who will free them and bring them to God.

'They said to him, 'Rabbi' (which translated means Teacher), 'where are you staying?' <sup>39</sup>He said to them, 'Come and see.' They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon.'

I love the way John gives details that point to accuracy, therefore the truth of his testimony; details like, 'The next day' and now he gives the time. Also they address Jesus as Rabbi, teacher just as Mary Magdalene does at the tomb,

'Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher).' John 20.16

We are told the name of one of the disciples who left John to follow Jesus; it is Andrew but what of the other man? Any guess must be conjecture yet obviously he is one of the first disciples.

<sup>40</sup> 'One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. <sup>41</sup>He first found his brother Simon and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah' (which is translated Anointed) <sup>42</sup>He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, 'You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas' (which is translated Peter.)'

Andrew did what we are all commissioned to do, believe in Jesus and tell others of him. John the Baptist is the herald of good tidings and Andrew follows his example. He goes at once to his brother Simon and takes him to Jesus. Once again we have the scene where the eyes of Jesus look into the eyes of another and search them out. Jesus gazes at Simon and re-names him, Cephas or in Greek Petros, Peter, the rock. How well this suits him, he will be the rock or foundation stone of the church. He is probably the most human of the disciples, loving, fallible, loyal and, after his failure and redemption, courageous.

John the Baptist is really the last of the prophets, he tells of the Messiah's coming. Jesus is the one foretold by the prophets, he is the promised Anointed one of God who will bring freedom to the Jews and the whole world.

<sup>1.12</sup> 'But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,'

To ordinary human beings like the first fallible disciples, like St. Paul and his helpers, and now every one of us, Jesus gives his commission, take the good news into the world and live in my way.

Our epistle reading from St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians follows very well from the gospel passage. 'Go and baptise all nations in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.' This is part of Jesus' 'Great Commission' to his disciples at his ascension. Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles is addressing the church in Corinth. He had first visited it around 49AD. Corinth was a busy sea port. It was rebuilt completely by the Romans and they had made it the capital of Greece. Obviously the gods of Greece and Roman gods were worshipped to say nothing of the cult of Emperor Worship. It is into this pagan world, a cosmopolitan city, that Paul comes and establishes the church. Paul is writing his first letter to the Corinthians from Ephesus. Actually all is not well with the church in Corinth, we learn this in verse ten onwards.

<sup>10</sup> 'Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions among you, but that you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose. <sup>11</sup> For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. <sup>12</sup> What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul', or 'I belong to Apollos', or 'I belong to Cephas', or 'I belong to Christ.'

Here we have the besetting sin, divisions and I expect power struggles. These people were used to worshipping lots of deities in the old culture. But that's not how it must be any longer. There are to be no factions, in the Christian church, all must be one, worshipping God the Father and Jesus Christ. If we begin here then go back to the beginning of the chapter it is easier to understand Paul's message and emphasis, Jesus Christ is all in all.

<sup>1</sup> 'Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,'

First Paul gives his credentials, I am an apostle according to God's will, commissioned to give the good news of Jesus Christ to all people. The message is for the whole world.



<sup>2</sup> 'To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.'

What is a Christian? It is simple, says Paul, all who call Jesus Christ Lord. Not Caesar, nor any god. No, there is one God, in three persons. Jesus Christ, fully human and divine, has set the Christians apart as holy unto him. They are Christ's people with one Lord and Saviour. A Christian is baptised into the church of Jesus Christ, no other. Paul is writing to the Corinthian Christians but as he says his words are to everyone who calls on Jesus' name. His first task in his letter is a blessing. <sup>3</sup> 'Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.'

Paul follows this with a tiny sentence,

<sup>4</sup> 'I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus,'

To begin with it is Jesus Christ who is at the centre of everything, Paul mentions Jesus about eight times in as many verses. Why, because Jesus is the centre. That word 'grace' has such a wealth of meaning. These are the promises of God given to humanity because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God and man. He and he only is at the centre of all. Jesus is obedient to his Father and carries out the plan of God conceived at the beginning of time. Jesus is the fulfilment of the Jewish scriptures and Jesus calls all humanity to him to be co-heirs and sons and daughters of their loving God. There is no difference Jew or Gentile, no status, no superiority or inferiority all are one in Jesus and all are equally loved by God.

<sup>5</sup> 'for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— <sup>6</sup> just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— <sup>7</sup> so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.'

The Corinthian Christians have been well taught in all true doctrines, they have received the gifts of the spirit through baptism and so must be ready, like all Christians, to spread the word of God, to tell of Jesus Christ and to live in a new way putting the old pagan lifestyle away and putting Jesus at the front of their lives and walking in his way, the way of peace, concord, truth and fellowship.

<sup>8</sup> 'He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup> God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.' If you truly turn to Jesus and walk in his way then God will call you to himself in the fullness of time. Here Paul is talking of God's newly created order, when Jesus Christ will return to judge the earth, when he will come as King in triumph. This is what we pray, 'Thy Kingdom come thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' The new creation is God's plan for the fullness of time but every Christian should work towards that time.

We are all called to follow Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour and not only to spread the good news but live it out in our lives. People are drawn to Jesus by lives which follow his example of worship, compassion and truth. Without that when selfishness takes over then the result is division and strife, which the Corinthian church was in danger of. Step back from that, says St. Paul and return to the only true Lord, Jesus and God, our loving Father.

*'Jesus is Lord! God sends his Holy Spirit to show by works of power that Jesus is Lord.'* David J Mansell