



Revd Ro's Reflection on Third Sunday of Epiphany

Year A

1 Corinthians 1.10-18

Matthew 4.12-23

Recently we have been looking at the life and witness of John the Baptist, the last of the prophets, the one foretold by the prophet Isaiah who would tell of the Messiah and prepare the way for him. I said before just how dangerous this was for John, the priests and Pharisees already have him marked and Herod is concerned.

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

²¹ And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the prophet?' He answered, 'No.' ²² Then they said to him, 'Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?' ²³He said,

'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,
"Make straight the way of the Lord" ',
as the prophet Isaiah said. (John 1)

²⁴ Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.'

The clouds were gathering around John and also Jesus. Our reading today begins,

¹² 'Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee.'

We are told no more here but in Mark's gospel we have the whole sordid tale.

¹⁷ 'For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. ¹⁸For John had been telling Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.' (Mark 6)

John is hugely courageous. He tells people to turn from sin, to repent and be baptised; to prepare themselves for the coming of the Messiah. He also lives it out in his life, he has high standards and speaks out for the truth. He challenges corruption and evil wherever he sees it. Then he turns his attention to the king. Herod was not of the true line, he was a puppet king put in place by the Romans to do their will, he was a bully and utterly ruthless. He had married his brother Philip's wife,

that was not allowed by law and John is vocal in his condemnation of it. We all know the story of Herodias' daughter dancing for Herod and his foolish drunken promise before his guests.

²⁶ 'The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. ²⁷ Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison.' (Mark 6)

It really was only a matter of time. Actually this account begins in retrospect, John is dead and Herod knows of Jesus, he is afraid because crowds are flocking to him. No doubt he is afraid and guilty because of what he has done to John.

¹⁴ 'King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, 'John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.' ¹⁵ But others said, 'It is Elijah.' And others said, 'It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.' ¹⁶ But when Herod heard of it, he said, 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.'

It is probably the Macbeth syndrome. John was a great prophet and he was right to condemn Herod. Herod has committed a great sin in murdering John and he knows it. Now here is Jesus, another threat to him.

In St. Matthew's gospel Jesus is baptised and straight away the Spirit leads him into the wilderness where he meets temptation and evil head on. Of course Jesus has risen from the waters of baptism just as the Israelites had crossed the Red Sea, now he spends forty days in the wilderness as they spent forty years. But what a difference, think of the number of times they strayed from God's way during those days, frankly what a mess they made of it. Jesus, God's Anointed one, is faultless and spurns temptation and evil. He obeys God not his own desires,

^{4.4} "One does not live by bread alone,

but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." '

So here he stands on the brink of his mission, obedient to God's plan conceived from the beginning. Jesus is fully human and divine and he will lead his people to freedom. He is the long awaited Messiah who will set his people free. Jesus is ready for his mission but he hears of John's arrest and knows the danger from Herod. Jesus has a job to do, his ministry is just beginning, there must be no arrest yet, Jesus has to fulfil his commission and tell of the good news of God, therefore he takes immediate action.

¹² Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³ He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, Capernaum is on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee near Bethsaida. Here Jesus settled. Notice how many times Matthew quotes the scriptures. He sets out his message quite clearly and there must be no misunderstanding. He made the point that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, the city of David because he was descended from David. He quotes the prophecy about the slaughter of the innocent children which takes place under the orders of Herod the Great. Now he quotes Isaiah,

¹⁴ so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

¹⁵ 'Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,

on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—

¹⁶ the people who sat in darkness

have seen a great light,

and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death

light has dawned.'

This quotation is from Isaiah 9. It is of course one of the famous Christmas readings where Isaiah tells of the coming of the Messiah and just what kind of Messiah they are to expect.

⁶ For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;

authority rests upon his shoulders;

and he is named

Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,

Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

⁷His authority shall grow continually,

and there shall be endless peace

for the throne of David and his kingdom.

He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness.'

The Messiah will bring in God's reign of justice, righteousness and freedom. He will in fact establish the kingdom values that the people should have been living by. This special child, God's anointed one, will set not only the Jews free but all God's people. What follows Matthew's quotation from Isaiah are Jesus' own words.

¹⁷ 'From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'

The Kingdom of heaven is here for all who will embrace it. Jesus begins God's newly created order.

Here Jesus sounds just like the Baptist. He is bringing good news for everyone. He is there to lead them back to God's way, the way that leads to freedom. So as with John, the crowds flock to him.

But what do they expect of him? If he is the Messiah, if he is the king who will bring freedom, then surely he will be the one to throw out the Roman conquerors! The might of the Empire cannot be overestimated; they had trampled so much of the known world. How then was Israel to be set free?

Well by the power of God. Trouble was most Jews couldn't see further than the point of a sword.

Surely this leader would win great battles, he would be the hero who would smash the might of Rome, answering force with a force but this time he would vanquish, wouldn't he?

The answer to that was a resounding no. Jesus said to Pilate,

³⁶ 'My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.'

³⁷Pilate asked him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.' (John 18)

This is St. John and he is quite specific. Jesus is God and King but he is not the king the world expects. Time and time again Jesus has warned the Jews to put away the idea of armed resistance. Time and time again he has warned them of the disaster that this will lead to; and he is quite right, as the annihilation of Jerusalem and the Temple in AD 70 shows.

Pilate cannot hope to understand Jesus. Jesus is saying my kingdom does not conform to the standards of this secular world. My kingdom is of God, and the kingdom values are what people must live by. War is no good, destruction leads to more destruction. Peace is the key, peace, truth, justice, love these are the values of God. Jesus is not saying don't stand up for what is right. He did just that and it led to Calvary, John did that and he was killed by Herod. What he is saying is that yes the path of God will be difficult but it is the only true path to freedom.

‘Whoever will be my follower must take up his cross.’

Of course so many of the Jews do not accept him because he does not conform to their picture of the Messiah or because they are fearful of him or are jealous. But as St. John puts it,

¹⁰ ‘He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,’ (John 1)

Now the reading turns to the calling of the first men who do accept him, the disciples.

¹⁸ ‘As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.’

It seems as though Jesus just walked by and called these men whom he didn’t know at all. Maybe, but in John’s gospel we remember that Andrew and another unnamed man were disciples of John the Baptist. It was the Baptist, who pointed Jesus out with those very significant words,

²⁹ ‘Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’ (John 1)

They follow him and Andrew fetches his brother Simon to Jesus who gives him the name, Peter, the rock. We are told in St. John’s gospel they remained with him that day. Maybe then Jesus knew them, recognised them as the men he wanted, they had already been drawn to him and now Jesus calls them. They were experienced Galilean fishermen, members of the family business. It is exactly the same for the other two men,

²¹ ‘he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them.’

They have established jobs, their families depend upon them. Zebedee is standing there in the boat watching this. Imagine his amazement and consternation when this happens. Here is Jesus, the one whom the crowds flock to; the man they are saying is not just a young rabbi, not a prophet, but the Messiah, the holy one of God. The fishermen must have been so proud to have been called. There is absolutely no hesitation from them,

²⁰ ‘Immediately they left their nets and followed him.’

They accepted the call to ‘fish for people.’ Relationships are a two way thing God calls, people need to respond and there is never coercion. The choice must be free. Look at Mary’s ‘yes’ to the angel.

This is how Denise Levertov expresses it in her wonderful poem Annunciation,

‘The engendering Spirit

did not enter her without consent.

God waited. She was free

to accept or to refuse, choice

integral to humanness.’

Now the call is to the first disciples, all apart from John will be executed, but they step into the unknown future because God calls them. That call comes to every one of us and Jesus waits for our response. It is a call to step into the unknown in faith. On Sunday, the lady who gave the talk at the church service I attended said, ‘We are not simply looking back to events in the past, we are learning from them and acting on them.’ How true that is. We are to live out the message of Christ in our lives. We are all, ‘called to serve.’ Malcolm Guite puts it like this in his poem, ‘The call of the disciples,’

‘He calls us all to step aboard his ship, take the adventure of this morning’s wing, raise sail with him, launch out into the deep, whatever storms or floods are threatening.’

The first step is one of faith, the decision to follow, to answer his call. The second is to attune our lives to his teaching.

Matthew follows this with an account of Jesus' healing ministry.

²³ 'Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. ²⁴So his fame spread throughout all Syria,'

People flocked to him, they went to see this amazing man who had power over disease, they went in desperate hope for a cure, but they went to see the man of God who did wonders in his name. Jesus never did any work in his own name but in God's. The works of power are through God and they are signposts that point to him. They are for his glory that all might believe.

The Corinthian Christians have accepted the call. In a pagan society, with threat of persecution, they have turned to Christ. Paul has, as we saw last week, established the church there, now he writes this first letter to them.

⁴ 'I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— ⁶ just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— ⁷so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.'

They have been well taught. They have accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and King. They have salvation, won by Christ and through God's grace they are co heirs with Christ and children of a loving God. But all is not well,

¹⁰ '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.'

Divisions, power struggles, false doctrines, they are the things which will destroy the church and not just the early Corinthian church either. Paul is not there, he is in Ephesus but he knows what is going on and it is a perilous situation.

¹¹ 'For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. ¹² 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.' ¹³Has Christ been divided?'

This is faction of the worst kind; they are forming groups or cliques. We are Jesus' people, we support Peter, no we are for Apollos, another teacher, or we are Paul's. Paul, just like John the Baptist, has to put the record straight, this is serious,

'Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptised in the name of Paul?'

Jesus and Jesus only is at the centre. Jesus is the Messiah; Jesus is part of the Godhead. He came to earth at his incarnation; he taught us God's way, with him began God's newly created order of justice, love, peace and righteousness just as the prophet foretold. Jesus died in love for us and took away the sins of the whole world. He is not simply for the Jews but all people. You Gentle Christians have the full benefits of God's grace, says Paul. You have eternal life because Christ rose from the tomb and conquered death forever. You will have a place in God's newly created order when Jesus will come again. All this they had been taught. All this we know.

But, and it is the besetting sin, faction raised its ugly head and divisions were threatening not just the church but the true doctrines about Jesus Christ. I love this next bit, how very human it is,

¹⁴ 'I thank God that I baptised none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵ so that no one can say that you were baptised in my name. ¹⁶ (I did baptise also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptised anyone else.)'

Paul is very clear about his job. It is to spread the gospel, to be the apostle to the Gentiles, to bring the word of Jesus, saviour and Lord to all people.

¹⁷ 'For Christ did not send me to baptise but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.'

Paul is not talking about clever debating either,

¹⁸ 'For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.'

We have to remember that Corinth was a Greek city rebuilt as a Roman colony. Intellectual debating was of vital importance in their culture and people would support certain intellectual teachers, thus there were divisions and factions, supporters' clubs if you like. Well says Paul, stop harking back to that way of life, you are not following different teachers, all our teaching points one way, to Jesus Christ, human and divine!

Then he makes the point of the message of Christ. It is not about worldly wisdom. It's not about rationality. If you are looking at the story of Jesus Christ from a rational point of view it makes no sense,

²² 'For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, ²³ but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,'

The message of Jesus is not about clever rhetoric, it is not about conventional wisdom or traditional ideas of human power. It is about the power of God, the power of Jesus Christ, the power of the Holy Spirit let loose in the world. That power turns everything upside down. It is the truth of God. Jesus Christ, fully human and divine came to this world at Bethlehem, he brought the good news of God and died for humanity and rose again for us,

²⁴ 'but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.'

It wasn't rational to leave a good job, get out of the boat and follow Jesus and die for him. It still isn't, but we all obey his call in some degree. We all are changed by Jesus. He offers a new way of life and we need to embrace it and take his message of love into the world by acting it out.

'Will you come and follow me if I but call your name? Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?' John L Bell and Graham Maule

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