

Sunday 13th December 2020 Sermon on John 1:6-8, 19-28

This Sunday marks the halfway point in Advent. I suppose that means that we should be at least halfway through our preparations for Christmas. Would all of you who feel that you are in that position like to put up your hands?

Well, if you are well prepared, you are an example to us all.

Isn't it easy to focus only on our preparations: making lists; writing cards; sending cards; trying to find the cards that you bought in good time and which have now disappeared into that Christmas black hole; thinking about presents; buying presents; and trying to find the presents that you bought just two days ago. Not to mention wrapping presents. I am known in my family as someone who is not very good at wrapping; let's face it, I am rubbish. But I do make up for it with the amount of sticky tape I use in the process! It is so easy for all of this 'business' to become all-consuming and **very stressful**.

The gospel reading today takes us back to the beginning. To the time when a man called John, was sent from God to bear witness to one who was the light of the world. It is clear, right from the beginning that John was sent. He didn't decide for himself, he was given a mission by God to be a witness; to be a witness to the light. A witness has first-hand, direct knowledge; does not rely on being told what has happened but experiences it directly. (The Greek word used here for

witness is *martur*, meaning a witness even unto death; (Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-end) which was John's ultimate fate.)

John said of Jesus:

"This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'"

In the following passage (chapter 1 verses 19 to 28), we read of John's authority being questioned. News had reached the Jewish authorities, in Jerusalem of this preacher, and priests and Levites, indeed a whole delegation, were sent, hot-foot, to Bethany, on the other side of the Jordan, to discover what was going on. Who was this itinerant preacher? They were taking this seriously.

It is worth remembering that John may have been living in the wilderness, dressed like a prophet in camel hair and eating locusts and honey, but he was the son of Zechariah, the priest, so he had authority behind him. The Pharisees questioned him carefully. They asked, 'Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?

John answered them directly. "I am not the Christ." "I am not Elijah or the Prophet, I am the voice of one calling in the desert, Make straight the way for the Lord."

He continued, “I baptise with water but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals, I am not worthy to untie.”

John does not baptise Jesus. John is not the light but is a witness who is able to testify about ‘the light that comes into the world.’ That is his role. To testify and to be a witness; indeed, as we are all called to be witnesses. We are called to be followers of Christ, but what does it mean to be a witness?

As I have said, a witness is someone who has first-hand knowledge of something; has experienced something directly and is prepared to testify to the truth of what they have seen..

How can we be witnesses to something that happened 2000 years ago?

Yet isn’t that what we are called to do? We did not know Jesus when he was here on earth, but we do know him now, through faith and through the sacraments of bread and wine.

As witnesses we are given the responsibility of passing on our faith; to testifying to the truth of God’s love through his Son, Jesus Christ and to spreading the good news of eternal life through his redemption. It’s quite a Christmas present!

Gill Barrett