

John 1:6-8,19-28

17.12.17

*The wilderness of 'not'.*

It seems that there are some people who are destined to be remembered not so much for what they were but for what they were not. For example, in the United Kingdom there are certain politicians who are referred to sometimes as 'the greatest leader not to have become prime minister', and they will forever carry that tag. Or for someone like me who grew up to the music of the Beatles I was always aware of their original drummer, Pete Best, who was famously sacked just before the group hit the big time, making room for Ringo Starr. Poor Pete Best has had to live his life condemned to be the Beatle who was not. Well, it's rather the same with the man sent from God of whom we have read this morning and whose name was John. It is a strange introduction to him that we are given in our reading for the writer seem much more interested in who John was not than who he was. In fact the word 'not' clings to John like a shroud.

Before being introduced to John, however, we need to refer to the verses that come before our passage, verses which we did not read, but which speak beautifully of Christ in cosmic and eternal terms. 'In the beginning as the Word', we read – the Word spoken right back at the dawn of time when creation emerged from darkness and chaos. And in these verses Jesus is described as the fount of all being, the one through whom all things came into existence: 'without him not one thing came into being', as it says. And the passage goes on to speak of Christ as life and as light, these crucial components to a viable creation. So the writer of this Gospel is bending language in order speak positively of Christ who is the key to all that is. In Jesus we are dealing with the great exclamation that detonated the Big Bang, the great 'yes' that launched the cosmos into existence. But then, however, as we read on, the focus of this chapter narrows, narrows right down, picking out this solitary figure: 'There was a man sent from God whose name was John.' And immediately, in contrast to all that has been said about Jesus, we meet in John the negative, the 'not', the 'no'. He himself – John – we are told, 'was not the light'. So if we imagine people saying to John, 'are you the light?' then where Jesus' answer would be 'yes, I am!' John's answer must be, 'no, I am not.' And

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when people asked John, ‘are you the Messiah?’ his answer can only be, ‘No, I am not the Messiah.’ And where people ask him, ‘are you Elijah, returned to his people?’ then again John must answer in the negative, ‘No, I am not.’ And so it goes on. ‘Are you the long-awaited prophet. ‘No!’ No, no, no – I am not, not, not. In fact it’s interesting to note that in the other gospels John is described positively as ‘the Baptist’ or ‘the baptizer’. But here even that is taken from him. He is simply John, a man sent from God, a witness, a voice crying in the wilderness. And put him alongside Jesus and all that John has to say for himself is ‘I am not worthy – not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.’

It’s such a fascinating contrast between the very positive presentation of Jesus and the profile of John, immersed as he is in a river of negativity. In fact in these thirteen verses that we read there are a total of ten ‘nots’, ‘neithers’ or ‘noes’, and it is these negatives that constitute John’s identity. And we have to see all this in the context of the rest of this Gospel where we find one phrase that is frequently attached to Jesus. It’s the phrase ‘I am’. There is a whole string of ‘I am’ sayings by Jesus: ‘I am the light of the world; ; ‘I am the good shepherd’, ‘I am the bread of life’, ‘I am the Way, the Truth and the Life’ and so on. And these are controversial for the words ‘I am’ in the original language are the root of God’s name which is too holy to be uttered. And it’s not surprising that Jesus, the fount of all being, the word that spoke creation into existence, should describe himself in divine terms and take those sacred words, ‘I am’ upon his lips. But where Jesus declares ‘I am’ John declares ‘I am not...’

I would suggest to you that this is where John is such a key and crucial figure in the Gospel story and let me tell you why. You see, the story of Jesus’ ministry is one in which negation is challenged and overcome. So as we follow Jesus’ ministry we find that everywhere he goes he exposes the power of death that is at work in the world, and the power of death is the power of negation. So the sick, and lame, and the lepers, and the outcasts, and the sinners are those in whom negation is at work: the negation of health, the negation of life, the negation of inclusion in community and society. Death negates. Sin negates. And the presence of Jesus, the great ‘I am’, the source of all light and life and being, exposes sin and death and overcomes the negation. And the result is that everywhere Jesus goes he leaves joy in his wake, the joy that is celebrated on

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this third Sunday in Advent, Gaudate Sunday. Jesus leaves behind him sick people who are healed, and sinners who are forgiven, and doubters whose faith in God is strengthened. But not everybody! There is a hidden subtext running through the Gospel and it concerns ‘the nots’: those who were not healed; those who were not reinstated, but who remained socially excluded on the margins; those whose faith was not bolstered but who were still overshadowed by doubt. We don’t hear much about them. Their story is not told. The gospel’s focus, rightly, is on the positive, on God’s ‘yes’ in Jesus. But on the margins of the text, in the shadows, hidden between the lines are the ‘noes’, the ‘nots’. And John personifies them. John symbolizes them and speaks for them. He is their voice.

One incident particularly discloses and reveals this. We read in the other gospels of John’s eventual arrest for his outspoken criticism of King Herod. And John is languishing in prison. And not surprisingly he begins to doubt. His faith in Jesus is at breaking-point, and he sends his disciples to ask Jesus, ‘are you the one who is to come, or should we wait for someone else?’ Here is John the doubter, the questioner, the one who is struggling to believe. And back comes Jesus’ reply: ‘go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive her sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have good news brought to them.’ Great! God is at work! God’s rule is spreading! But that must have been hard for John to take, rotting away in a prison cell. The Kingdom of God may be at work out there, bringing joy to the afflicted but it has surely by-passed John’s lonely prison. Jesus may be bringing liberty to the captives out there but it’s not coming John’s way. And so he is the doubter. He is the marginalized prisoner, the ‘not released’ – and that is how he will die. Not the light; not the Messiah; not Elijah; not the prophet; not set free. John lives and dies, a voice crying in the wilderness of the ‘not’.

So let me tell you why I am so glad that John is in the text, that his story is told. And I know I’m entering dangerous waters here, but please bear with me. I would suggest to you that one rather more hopeful feature of our modern world – or, more accurately what we call the postmodern world - is an awareness of how much some people’s stories and their identities have been subtly negated and marginalized. The classic example is the way we have taught history. It is often said, rightly, that history is written by the victors

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while the stories of the losers, or the subjugated, are often lost, forgotten, obliterated. Indeed, more than that, it is true to say that history has frequently been 'his-story' – an account that is read through a male lens, and of course that reflects the balance of power that has held sway in human affairs. But what is heartening is the retrieval in recent times of women's and of others' stories and voices. We could describe it as a retrieval of 'the not' - a discovery of the not heard, the suppressed. Or to give a very current example of a 'not': there is a considerable debate taking place at the moment in certain circles about transgendered people. Well, I have had the privilege in my ministry of being very involved pastorally with transgendered people – one in particular, and I have therefore met this issue face to face, in very distressed flesh and blood. I need not go into details here – this is not a sermon about transgender – but in my experience these are people who live in the wilderness of the 'not' – in some cases 'not male', in others 'not female', in others 'not either'. And we sin if we turn a deaf ear to their voices. Please, this is not about 'political correctness' - that is too easy and too trivial a dismissal. It's about power. In recent weeks our texts here in worship have focused us on power, such a rich biblical theme. And in considering 'the not' and these issues that arise from today's reading we are confronted again with issues of power and its dynamics. And wherever there is power – even the benign, liberating power of God's Kingdom that arrived with Jesus - there is always a 'not', always a negation: at least in this world, in this old tired order. And John is the focus of that 'not'.

What is so wonderful, however, what is good news, is that John is a voice, a voice crying in the wilderness. And that is the voice of the 'nots'. And this third Sunday in Advent with its focus on John is for them. John's voice, out in the wilderness, cries for all who experience the 'not' side of the Kingdom. So the voice of John speaks for all who pray and are not healed. It speaks for all who are captive in one way or another and who are not freed. It speaks for all whose prayers are not answered. It speaks for all who, like John, doubt and struggle to believe. And beyond them, pushing further, John's voice speaks for all who dwell in the wilderness of 'not': those whose stories are not heard, those whose identities are suppressed or dismissed, those who are forever saddled with what they are 'not'. The good news is that all these are caught up in the kingdom that is arriving with Jesus. John speaks for them, representing them, and God hears, and they are specially enfolded in God's

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embrace. And so, on this Gaudate Sunday, God's Word is, be not afraid and be not silenced, but rejoice! Amen.