

Year B Advent 3 17th Dec 2023

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1: 6-8, 19-28

At the end of my first year at university I spent the summer in Boston where I had some very interesting times, including contributing in a tiny way to NASA's space research programme. Sitting in a darkened space with my head clamped at an angle, I had to use a marker pen to identify where momentary tiny spots of light appeared on a screen, so getting anywhere close was more luck than judgement. But the point was, I was a witness to the light, just as John declares that he is a witness to the light, the real light. I'm sure we all have our own stories of how we have been witnesses to the light in our own way.

As this difficult year draws to a close, it feels sometimes as if the darkness has come perilously close to overcoming the light. The climate and economic crises, the wars in Ukraine and now Gaza. Yet we have also seen in those same situations an abundance of witness to the innate goodness of humanity – of millions of people trying to do their best to improve the situation for those in incredibly difficult situations, even when it means putting even when it means putting themselves at risk.

That is why, as Paul reminds us so clearly in our Thessalonians reading, we must give thanks IN all circumstances. Not necessarily FOR all circumstances but IN all circumstances. In fact, all the readings for this Third Sunday of Advent seem remarkably appropriate for the situation we find ourselves in. Isaiah is speaking to a people who have lost everything in exile. Yet he brings them Good News, he says, good news for the prisoner, for the oppressed, for the broken-hearted, for those who mourn. It wasn't really Good News time then any more than it feels like Good News time now does it? But it is particularly at times like these that we are called to be witnesses to the light, to bind up the broken hearted and so on. But equally we must remember we are not THE light, we are just little pinpricks of light in the darkness, we are just witnesses.

Isn't it interesting that John the Evangelist doesn't refer to John as John the Baptist or John the Baptiser or even John the son of Zechariah as the other Gospel writers do? It's almost as if they were merely labels and not what was really important. And that is who John is rather than what he does. Actually,

we learn much more about who John is not rather than who he is. In today's reading there are 10 negatives. John is not the Messiah, not Elijah, not the prophet, he is not worthy to undo the thongs of Jesus's sandals and the Jewish authorities do not know who is standing among them. Indeed, even before they ask, he tells them he is not the Messiah. It's as if John thinks their real question is Are you the One? No, he is saying, I am John the Witness – just as we are. All we can do is say Come and See. We just have to give others the invitation and trust that what they see, what God shows them, will result them wanting to become witnesses themselves.

John the Witness tells us principally who he is not, but for all his unusual way of life, eating honey and locusts, John the Witness was also clearly a leader, who had such an attractive personality that he could draw such vast crowds that the religious authorities felt threatened by him. Yet he was also a leader who knew he had to decrease so that Jesus could increase. Like Jesus, he was a servant leader, but like the rest of us he also had his doubts and misunderstandings – not least about what sort of Messiah Jesus really was.

Knowing who we are not and knowing who we really are matters.? But saying who we are not as Christians is not loving or inviting – Saying Oh I'm not that kind of Christian, or I wouldn't go to that kind of Church is defensive and puts up barriers.

But when we have stripped out all we are not, what's left of our faith, what positive vision of our faith can we offer to the outside world, a world that needs God far more than it cares to admit. John's answer is clear, unequivocal and countercultural. I am the voice of one in the wilderness crying out "Make straight the way of the Lord."

Yes, John knew exactly who he was and what God was calling him to do – which quite simply was to point to Jesus. Buddhists talk of pointing a finger to the moon. John knew that he was the finger and Jesus was the moon. And whatever other individual gifts God has given us, God calls us all to point to Jesus as the light of life.

We are witnesses to the fact that God is reconciling the world to himself by offering hope and healing, life and salvation. All we need to do is look to see where God is on the move and witness to it. That is especially true when God is on the move in our own lives. That is the best witness of all even if not everyone will believe us. But that's when we can truly speak with authenticity.

That's what the women at the tomb did on the Day of Resurrection. No-one believed them but they were compelled to bear witness to what they had seen and heard.

As we anticipate the Incarnation and Christ's return there is no better time than Advent, particularly this Advent, to say Behold – come and see.