

Brackenhurst 14 December 2008 pm
Advent 3: John the Baptist (a voice in the wilderness)

Welcome & Notices

Scripture:

John 1:19-27

Message

INTRODUCTION

- Who is your favourite international band?
 - discuss
 - Can we reach consensus?
- What would you say, what would you do, if you heard that [band] were coming to play in South Africa?
 - Anyone to scream?
 - Any comments?
- They make the announcement like a year before
 - You get all excited, you phone your friends
 - * Have you heard...!
- And then they tell you when the tickets are going on sale
 - In the old days you would camp outside the ticket office so that you could be first in line when ticket sales open
 - Nowadays you wait until midnight sitting at your computer waiting for the online sales to open
 - * try to log on with all the other million and one fans
 - It's more comfortable, but it doesn't have the atmosphere of camping on the street.
- But it's exciting, there's a sense of expectation [your band] is coming to South Africa
 - And you've got tickets!
 - * And there's going to be an opening act
- Who would open for [your band]?
 - discuss
 - * And they're going to be there as well
- What an amazing event that is going to be! You cannot wait for the day to arrive
 - You get there early to get a good place to watch the bands

- The opening act starts and [local band] is absolutely amazing, it just gets better and better
 - * You've never heard them that good — they are fantastic
- Then they finish up and it's interval and
- you go home
 - But the local act was just so good, there's no reason to stay for the main act
 - * Of course there is
- You've been waiting for a year, you struggled to get tickets
 - You've invited your friends
 - * Of course you're going to stay for the main act
- Friends, tonight as we journey through Advent we look at the supporting act to the main event
 - John the Baptist, and his ministry
- Over the last two weeks we've been looking at the hope of the promised Messiah; last week we looked at the promise in Old Testament of the Word to come
 - The Word of Life
 - the Word of Acceptance
 - the Word of Freedom
- Today we look at the one who announces that the time has come for the coming of that same Word in the flesh
 - The one who warms up the crowd for the main act
- he is not the main act, he's only there to set the stage for the main act, for the Messiah
 - for the Word made flesh
- John's gospel begins with a beautiful passage describing the coming of the Messiah
 - I think that it's one of the most wonderful scriptures in the Bible
 - “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”
- The hope of the generations has been realised, and John is the one who is to announce it.
 - The message of John, and the calling of John, have deep implications for our lives as Christ followers as well
 - * because many times we have a similar role to play that John does
- As we grow in Christ we need to learn who we are and the role that we are to play in proclaiming the good news
 - And then secondly we need to learn how to proclaim that good news to the world

- To make a way for the Lord in our lives
- To make a way for the Lord into the world
- an inward journey and an outward journey
 - How do we live so that people stay for the main act?
- And I think that there is something that we can learn from the example of John this evening
 - So tonight I simply want us to listen to what John says as people come to him and ask him who he is
- Here are three statements that he makes that we would do well to hear:
 - “I am not the Christ”
 - “I am the voice”
 - “Among you stands one...”

(1) “I am not the Christ”

- As the priests and Levites sent by the Jews of Jerusalem come to John they ask him a loaded question:
 - “Who are you?”
 - * And there was a reason to that question because there was an expectation, firstly of the coming Messiah
 - but secondly of the one who was going to announce his coming
 - * It had been prophesied in Isaiah 40:3
“A voice of one calling, “In the desert prepare the way for Yahweh”
- So there was an expectation of one who was coming and those who are sent to John in the desert want to clear this up
 - Is he the Messiah, the Christ, the one they were to expect, or is he the one prophesied about to prepare the way.
 - * Or is he some other random person of which there were many at that time
- His answer begins with a simple, yet profound statement:
 - “I am not the Christ”
 - * So he has clarified to the priests and the Levites that he is not the one prophesied about bringing salvation.
- Many times, as Christians, people will want to know who we are
 - They usually won’t come to us and say, okay, so who are you; what do you believe?
 - * But they watch us and when they approach us usually their words are more confrontational — “if you were really a Christian you wouldn’t do this or that or the next thing”

- My parents don't go to church and soon after I came to faith in Jesus every time I did something wrong
 - "If you were a Christian you wouldn't really treat your brother like that"
 - * You've probably heard it
- And I think that the reason that there is so much anger and antipathy towards the church today because people have high expectations of the church
 - Just like the Jews were expecting the Messiah, people expect a lot from the church
 - They expect the church to be Jesus
 - * And remember that the church is you and me
- But we need to hear the statement that John makes
 - "I am not the Christ"
- None of us are perfect, the church will never be perfect in this world.
 - That's not an excuse to do what we like, but it is a reason not to pretend to be perfect, not to pretend to be something we're not
 - * Not to pretend to be the Christ
 - * Not to pretend to have all the answers, not to pretend to be perfect while we sit in judgement on others
- One of the things I hate is hypocrisy — and that is one of the criticisms so often levelled at the church and Christians
 - let's not be dishonest about who we are
 - * I don't think God wants that
 - I don't think God wants people who pretend to be perfect
 - * there is only one who is perfect, that is the Christ and we are not the Christ
- God is far happier with honesty
 - None of us were created to be the Christ — we were created to be us, and that's what makes God happy
 - * And when we are genuinely us, doing what God has created us to do and be rather than trying to be what we are not, that's when we attract people
- In the time of John there were many people going around claiming to be prophets, claiming to be the Messiah and gathering a following, people had options about who they wanted to follow
 - Today people today are looking for something genuine amongst enormous choice
 - * But they want honesty and reality, not pretence
- When we drop the pretence that we so often carry about as our faith that's when people will look at us and say, "There's a life that is worth living"

- This is something that I want to be a part of
- John was created to be John, he said “I am not the Christ... I am not worthy to untie the thongs of his sandals”
 - Our task as Christians is not be the Christ, is not to be perfect, is not to be something that we’re not.

(2) “I am the voice”

- But as the conversation continues and as John makes the proclamation that he is not Christ the priests and Levites want to know, well then who are you?
 - Are you Elijah, or are you the prophet
- Now as I mentioned earlier there is an expectation of one to come, an expectation of one who would announce his coming and a whole bunch of people running around pretending that they are one or the other
 - For centuries the people had been reading and hearing that before the ‘great and terrible day of the Lord’ the great prophet Elijah would return.
 - * and if you go back and read the stories about Elijah you will discover that he didn’t die, but rather was taken directly up to heaven in a whirlwind, and so people were expecting him to return to announce the Messiah
 - So they were wondering if John was Elijah
- But there was also an expectation of the prophet — the voice in the wilderness — someone important who was to come, to prepare the way for the Messiah.
 - So they were wondering if he wasn’t Elijah, was he this prophet?
 - * And John must have been doing something along these lines, so the Pharisees send out some of the temple functionaries so that they can keep an eye on John
 - Why is he doing these things, who is he?
 - * He has already claimed that he is not the Christ
 - * Now he claims that he is not Elijah or the prophet
 - Just for the record Jesus himself thought that John was Elijah, even though John didn’t, but this is one of the puzzles of the New Testament
- But John claims that he is the voice, he is the one getting the people ready for someone else
 - He points people away from himself
 - He makes no claims as to his own grandeur, he is simply preparing the way for the Word which has become flesh
 - * He is of secondary importance.

- Maybe if we were to ask him about it today he would want to say, “I am just John... doing what God called me to do”
 - I get worried sometimes when I look at how we act as Christians and as the Church
 - * Sometimes it is all about us, building our reputation, growing our church, rather than working for the kingdom of God
- Let me share with you an illustration
- Now there are two instances that I can think of when a way needs to be cleared, a path straightened out.
 - One is when there is an emergency and emergency vehicles need to get to the site, the scene of the accident.
 - * They’ve got sirens and flashing lights, and in a country that has respectful drivers — and I was so impressed by this in the States
 - * You hear a siren and you pull over to the side of the road and stop until you’ve figured out where it is, where the emergency vehicles are going
 - Here we just ignore them
 - * But the point is to get out of the way so that those who are going to the aid of someone else have freedom of movement.
 - The other thing that happens, and we hear about often in the news, is when a dignitary needs to get from one place to another
 - * And sometimes there is need for a presidential convoy, but most often there is not
 - And we hear about little small town council members having the police shoot their way through the traffic
 - * And entourage drivers causing accidents to travel from one block to the next
 - * They demand the right of way.
- In the first case the sirens are to render assistance, in the second, usually, to proclaim arrogance and self importance
 - I’m afraid that sometimes as Christians and as Church when we try to prepare a way for the Lord we do that in arrogance, convinced of our own self-importance in the message
 - * Convinced of our own self-righteousness
 - * With lights blazing and sirens blaring
 - And nobody likes that, nobody is impressed by politicians in fancy motorcades
- John, by his words and actions, through his humility in claiming simply to be the voice, draws attention away from himself

- And points to the one who is coming, even to the point of having many of his own disciples leave to follow Jesus
 - * We don't preach ourselves, but the Kingdom of God and Jesus Christ as Lord.
- Or, as John put it, I am only a voice
 - There is his humility and true greatness
 - * This is how we are to act if we are to reveal Jesus to those who are searching

(3) "Among you stands one..."

- And so the Pharisees continue to ask him, well, if you aren't Elijah, if you aren't the prophet, then why do you continue to do what you do?
 - And John answers in a kind of around about way
 - * He doesn't say, this is why I do it
- He says, "I baptise with water, but among stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the things of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."
 - Among you stands one
 - * What an incredible statement!
- The one they are looking for, and indeed the reason that John is doing what he is doing is standing there among them!
 - This is fundamental to gospel, to the proclamation of the Kingdom: God is at hand!
- See Jesus was already there!
 - And the next day John points him out to his followers
 - * He says there goes the Lamb of God
- The proclamation is that Jesus stands among you. What an incredible statement of good news.
 - The one you have been waiting for, the one you have been searching for, Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, the Word made flesh
 - * Is here!
 - You just need him pointed out to you
- And that, I believe, is the answer to the question so many of us struggle with
 - Whether we are searching for ourselves
 - Or we're not quite sure what to say when somebody else asks us why we believe
- I began saying the people will probably look at us and ask, though not in so many words, why we do what we do, believe what we believe
 - We're asking, they're asking because they're searching

- One of my friends and colleagues, Trevor Hudson tells the story of his departure from a congregation where he worked in Washington DC, at the Church of the Saviour.
 - And as he left he asked the minister he'd worked with for a word
 - * if memory serves it was Gordon Cosby
- And Cosby replied, "Everyone sits beside his own pool of tears"
 - All of us, you, and me — don't think because I stand up here I don't have problems and pains — all of us sit beside that pool of tears and are longing, waiting
 - * Not necessarily for the one who is going to lead us from it
 - * But at least for the one who will sit with us at the pool
- Hear the words of John
 - "Among you stands one..."
 - * Jesus is already there
- He is with you, in fact — there is the Lamb of God
 - Sometimes we need just someone to make the way in our wilderness, to open our eyes to seeing Christ with us
 - * Other times we need to be John to someone else, to speak into their wilderness, their desert
- We don't do that by blowing our own trumpet, by rushing in with sirens blaring, by pretending to be Jesus with the solution to the world's problems
 - But just by being genuine, being ourselves
 - * And gently pointing out the Christ.

CONCLUSION

- I pray that this Christmas time that all of us would discover the presence of Christ among us once again
 - And that we in turn would be able to point Christ out to others
 - * That he may be glorified.
- May it be so for you, even as it is for me.
- Amen