

Unselfish confidence

A sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent, 17th December 2023

Reading: [John 1.6-8,19-28](#)

Pick your country, pick your crisis. When were we last in such need of good leadership? But what does good leadership look like? In last week's Nativity Play, Young Church gave an insight into this question.

The angels were in a flap: which star should lead the wise men to the newborn Jesus? What makes a true star? They held auditions, and there were three unsuccessful candidates: a sports star, a pop star and a movie star. Each assumed that it was all about them, so none got the gig (but did get, one angel informed us, a constellation prize).

Today we see a true star. Despite his animal skins and Bear Grylls survival diet (see [last week's gospel reading](#)) that is what John the Baptist is. He shows us an indispensable aspect of good leadership and, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of the Saviour, of Christian living.

We have just heard a filleted version of the opening verses of John's gospel. We read verses 6-8, then from verse 19. What comes before and between? If you come to the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols this evening you will find out, when the climax of the service will be John's towering [hymn to Jesus](#), the Word of God made flesh.

In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God.'

Verse after verse will roll around the church

...all things came into being through him...in him was life...the light shines in the darkness...

but then we'll get this, the words we've just heard:

There was a man sent from God whose name was John...He himself was not the light but he came to testify to the light.

It sounds like a gaffe; as if, in the middle of Hamlet's To Be Or Not to Be speech, a curtain opens to reveal a lighting engineer fiddling with the dimmers. An important person no doubt, but not the one we want to see. It's Jesus we want to hear about, the Word of God made flesh, so why drag in this weirdo, only to say that he is not the main man?

But I think our writer knows what he is about. For some people in those days, John the Baptist was the main man, and perhaps John the gospel maker needed to put John in his place. But what a place he gives him.

In the second part of today's reading, the authorities send agents to check out John and his leadership aspirations. There is talk like that in the Westminster air just now, though the Prime Minister may be relieved that there is less of it than there might have been after what was quite a week.

Years ago, when the Labour Party leadership was under similar scrutiny, a commentator gave a formula for assessing leadership runners and riders: never mind what a person says about not wanting the job, does he or she 'look, walk and speak the part'?

In John the Baptist's day, people have definite ideas about 'the part', about the leader they want, and the investigators run through the possibilities. Might John actually see himself as the top man, the Messiah, God's anointed one, a second King David to eject the Romans and bring freedom.

‘No,’ he says.

Or perhaps he sees himself as – Elijah. Elijah was a great prophet, and a mysterious one. The story is, he never really died in the usual sense, and many think he will return to herald God’s great day. John is a plausible candidate for Elijah 2.0 (he even dresses like him) so they ask, ‘Are you Elijah, then?’

‘No.’

That leaves one possibility: the Prophet. With a capital P. [The Hebrew scriptures say](#) that God will one day raise up a prophet like Moses to lead the people as he did. So, they ask, ‘Are you the Prophet?’

‘No.’

This is perplexing. Here is someone who really does look, walk and speak the part worryingly well, yet he rejects each part, each leading role, that is suggested. ‘So who are you, then?’

‘I’m not a who,’ says John, ‘I’m a what. *I* don’t matter. What matters is what I *say*. I am a voice crying in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord”.’

It is a remarkable display of confidence and humility.

Confidence, because he is happy to see himself as a big part of God’s great plan: those words about the voice in the wilderness are from the mighty prophet Isaiah, and John does not hesitate to apply them to himself.

But – here’s the humility – that doesn’t make him full of himself. I’m doing my baptising, he continues, which is important, but the one coming after me – well, I’m not worthy even to lace his shoes.

Like a true star, John grabs attention – and then he points to someone else. Confident humility.

Christian faith is generally good at preaching humility, and churches tend to have quite a few people in them who are not obviously self-centred. Good news, except when it’s confected humility, or when it’s a symptom of not having the confidence that we should feel, if not in ourselves then in the God who so generously gives us with gifts, gifts which we then pretend not to have.

I once had an American clergy colleague. She was gracious and patient, but on one occasion she snapped. ‘What is it with you Brits?’ she exclaimed. Now there’s a question, it could be almost anything. I asked what was the problem. She replied,

I ask someone to help with something. She says No. So I ask someone else, who says Yes. Now the first person is cross because someone else is doing the thing she said she couldn’t do.

Confectured humility. Sounds familiar?

Vicars and churchwardens are often asking people to do things – confident that they have what it takes – only to hear, ‘Oh no, I really don’t think I could do that.’ Have you ever said that? How true was it?

Unselfish confidence is what our world needs. It’s what God wants from us, otherwise people with confidence of another kind will make the running in a direction that God does not want. So how do you pull off this trick of having both confidence and humility?

It comes from the to-and-fro of worship, from the habit of putting yourself – every day in private, every week in public – consciously in the presence of God. When we do that, as we

are doing now, we are not flattering God but acknowledging God, paying the attention that it is wise for a creature to offer to the Creator.

Worship reminds me that I am not the centre of the world. I may have a head so big that I think that I am; more likely, I may feel that I have to behave as though I am, scared that if I am not the centre of attention I won't really exist.

Or I may work somewhere where I feel I have to play the game of ego jousting, scared that if I don't, I really will cease to exist, professionally speaking.

Either way, worshipping God can free me from these illusions.

Or, I may find it hard to admit to the significance I do have: easy to repeat John the Baptist's first words, 'I am not...' and hard to say what comes next, 'but I *am*...' But if I can just offer my attention to God, God can offer something back to me. Something like this:

You are not the centre of the world but I give you a place in it, and a purpose; a place that no-one else can take, and a purpose which will not be fulfilled if you do not fulfil it. And as with John the Baptist, I give you a voice. If you do not speak, it will not be heard.

John Henry Newman had it about right:

God has created me to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another....Therefore, I will trust Him...He does nothing in vain. He knows what He is about.