

The Pointing Finger

Sermon preached at St Mark's, Newnham
Sunday 13th December, 9.30

Jeremy Begbie

John 1:6-8, 19-28

I once heard a father speak of how he introduced his two-year old to the wonderful world of snow. The boy had never seen snow before. And it snowed hard one night. So in the morning he held his two-year old son in front of the kitchen window. And there was the magical white scene outside, the snow “deep and crisp and even”. He pointed out of the window and said “snow!” The boy said proudly “SNOW!”...while staring intently at his dad's finger.

“There was a man sent from God whose name was John.” He came to testify to the snow coming into the world; he himself was *not* the snow, but came to testify to the snow.

Let's face it, it can't have been easy being John the Baptist. All he ever wanted to be was a pointing finger. But everyone wants to point to *him*. Perhaps it's not that surprising. He's loud, passionate, persuasive, eccentric, bursting with charisma. And like any charismatic preacher, people flock to hear him. He even has own disciples, wilderness groupies hanging on every word. But over and over again he has to say to them: “it's not about me!”

And not just to his groupies.

The priest and Levites collar him and ask: “who *are* you?”
“I am **not** the Messiah.”

“Are you Elijah?” Elijah back again to usher in the Day of the Lord and restore the tribes of Jacob?
“I am **not**”

“Are you *the prophet?*”, a second Moses, the super-prophet, the final interpreter of the law?
“No”, he says.

“It's not about me. I'm only the forerunner, preparing the way of the Lord, the warm-up act for the One to come. I must decrease that *he* may increase. I'm only a pointing finger.”

And do you notice how John *the Gospel writer* is doing the same thing? He too is fascinated by John the Baptist. He says more about John the Baptist than any of the other Gospel writers. In fact, he's something of a star in John's Gospel, a celebrity. He even crops up in the Prologue. “In the Beginning was the Word” . . . and only 5

verses later: “There was a man sent from God” (John the Baptist). And near the end of the Prologue he pops up again. And straight *after* the Prologue – whom do we hear about first? John the Baptist.

But despite all that, John’s Gospel wants to tell us again and again: it’s not about him! So in the Prologue: “He came . . . to testify to the light,” we’re told, but “he himself *was not* the light” – just in case you might get the wrong idea! And when John the Baptist actually appears, we don’t get all those details you find in the other Gospels – nothing about his strange fashion sense, or the weird diet; nothing about John the social justice warrior; nothing about fire and repentance and judgement. No, in this Gospel, *what makes John the Baptist so important is that he’s unimportant . . .* compared to the one whose sandals he is not worthy to untie, the one who ranks *ahead* of him(15), the one who existed *before* him from all eternity (15), the Light that outshines all other lights. In this Gospel, John the Baptist is *the ultimate pointing finger*.

It’s all summed up in one little word. It’s there in the Prologue, but it haunts the whole Gospel, especially the opening chapters. It’s the word “witness.” “[John] was not the light but came to bear *witness* to the light.” John’s a star alright: the star witness.

So what makes a *witness*? Well, at the risk of staring too long at the pointing finger, let’s take a look at John and find out.

First, a witness is someone.

(1) who’s captivated by *the true light*

“He came as a *witness* to testify to the light . . . *The true light*, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world”

This is the season, of course, when the world is suddenly alight. We’re surrounded by lights. Whatever else Advent is about, it’s about a soaring electricity bill. ‘Tis the season to be illuminated. Lights on trees; lights hung over the Guildhall; spotlights on King’s College Chapel (and on Grantchester Church tower). Not to mention those mini-lights draped over your neighbour’s doors and windows (perhaps *your* doors and windows). There’s a suburban neighbourhood I know in Texas where you can go on a bus tour just to see the Christmas lights that swamp all the houses and gardens (like going to Blackpool); lights cascading over roofs and walls, great avalanches of kitsch.

Now, at its best I suppose all this dazzle and bedazzle *can* remind us that a dazzling light has come into the world, the Light of the World

And even the most garish lights do at least brighten up an otherwise pretty bleak mid-winter. It’s all harmless fun.

.....until of course we mistake it all for the True Light;
the light that doesn’t get turned off when January comes round;

the light that doesn't cover anything up, but exposes things as they really are,
including you and me;
the *only* light that make any deep sense of this strange world, including its
darkest places;
the only light that really will go on shining in the darkness of

chronic regret or crippling debt
or in the Covid Ward
the refugee camp
the homeless shelter
the lonely flat in Newnham or Grantchester

the only light that can shine in the darkness and *not* be overcome! Jesus
Christ, the Light of the World.

Maybe this Christmas,
it's time to be dazzled again by the True Light behind all the lesser lights and
phony lights,
to be captivated like John,
re-captivated, by the True Light.

That's how we become a witness, a pointer.

A second thing about a witness we learn here, a witness is someone

(2) whose *whole life points in one direction*

A finger, of course, *can't* point in different directions at the same time; only in
one direction.

And that's John the Baptist. We're not told a lot about his life, but everything
we *are* told – everything he says and does in the Gospels: it all speaks of a life
pointing in one direction, to the one true Light.

Why am I bothering to say this? Because it's easy to hear John the Baptist as
saying something like "Jesus is everything, I am nothing." But when John
says "he must increase but I must decrease", he's not saying "I'm nothing;
I'm worthless." He's saying Jesus is greater, and always will be greater. When
I say to our Vicar Rachel Rosborough "You must increase, I must decrease",
I'm simply saying the obvious: she's greater, superior. I'm not saying I don't
matter. Being a witness doesn't mean becoming nothing, it doesn't mean all
the things that make you what you are don't matter – your gifts and talents
and passions and loves.

No. But it *does* mean that all these things are magnetised, oriented in one
direction.

Speaking of magnets, the other day I was in Addenbrookes for a routine MRI
scan. Now I don't know *exactly* how an MRI machine works. Perhaps you do.

But I think I've got the basic idea. What the scanner does is magnetise all the protons in all the water molecules in your body, so they all line up in one direction. And because of that, eventually out comes an amazingly precise image of the inside of your shoulder or leg, or whatever. So if you ever find yourself at Addenbrookes inserted into a weird, metallic, elongated doughnut, and then bombarded by clicking and clunking, beeping and buzzing: remember – remember that something quite wonderful is going on: millions of your confused protons are getting sorted out, magnetised in one direction.

Most of us, of course, don't live lives pointing in one direction. We're not sorted out. We're pulled in many directions. Like a spinning compass. Some say this is our late modern, or post-modern world: we're tugged in multiple directions:

by emails on Outlook, notifications on iPhone;
by magazine images of the perfect body;
by ceaseless demands from those who want your time: pressure groups who want your signature, charities who want your donation. We so become multiply distracted, multiple tugged in multiple directions. "Fatal Distraction", you might call it.

But a witness is very different. I remember the first Christian I came to know well, a teacher as it happens. I saw him in the classroom, I saw him at home, I saw him with his family, I saw him on holiday. I saw him do a host of things. But somehow it all hung together. There was a kind of generosity in everything he did and was, a generosity I hadn't seen before. I just had to ask: where's all this coming from? I eventually found out he'd been captivated, magnetised by a living person, Jesus Christ.

Think of a Christian who's made a major impact on your life. I wouldn't be surprised if it's this that makes them different. It's not that they do only one thing fanatically; they probably do lots of things, but everything points in one direction. They're magnetised by the love of Jesus Christ who liberates them from running around trying to please everyone. They've found what T S Eliot called 'A condition of complete simplicity. (Costing not less than everything.)'

That's what it means to be a witness, a pointer.

And one more thing.....A witness is someone

(3) who *makes Christ believable*

"He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that *all might believe* through him."

Pause for a moment to consider the sheer madness, the insanity of what we're being asked to believe each Sunday, as we come together like this.

We're being asked to believe:

that the secret of the universe,
 the key to the purpose of it all,
 the rhyme and reason of every atom that ever was,
 and the clue to its future

is found in a joiner's son in an obscure corner of the Roman Empire
 just over 2000 years ago,
 a would-be Jewish Messiah who gets hounded to death by his own
 people, crushed by the political forces of Rome,
 and left alone to die in degradation and shame.

We're seriously saying *this Jesus* is the clue to the world's past, present,
 and future?

This Jesus is the clue to who God is and what God's up to in the
 world?

This crucified Jesus, nailed and naked, is the Creator's answer to the
 world's evil?

It's not *immediately* obvious, is it?

So why are we stupid enough to believe it?
 Because of the likes of John the Baptist; who make the unbelievable
 believable.

What's John been doing for all these weeks and months, years perhaps?

He's been preparing his people for *this Jesus*;
 helping them hear and re-hear their own Scriptures,
 tracing the plotlines that all come together and converge on the Messiah to
 come.

And now faced with the man himself,
 he can go right to the heart of things:
 "Behold *the Lamb of God* who takes away the sin of the world!"
 Here he's pulling on a whole cluster of Old Testament texts on lambs:

the lamb led to slaughter in Isaiah's Servant Song;
 the lamb sacrificed at each Passover;
 the lamb God provides for Abraham as he holds the knife over Isaac;

he's pulling on them all to show that the Messiah *is the Lamb who will die*.
 God's not going to deal with the sin of the world by amassing imperial armies
 but by bearing that sin from below, and bearing it away. John is showing
 where Israel's story leads, to the crucified Lamb, so that we will *believe* that *this*
 is how God works, this is how God deals with the world's tragedy, *this* is how
 evil is defeated. *This* is what's gloriously confirmed on Easter Day. John's
 making the unbelievable believable, so that what seems like madness begins
 to look marvellous.

And of course, it can happen in a hundred ways today.

It can happen when you take one of the Gospels and read it from start to finish in one sitting. Try it with Mark's Gospel. And if this strange story of Jesus culminating in a death and resurrection starts to make fresh sense, that's because Mark is acting as your witness.

It can happen when you join a homegroup, and someone says something that suddenly makes sense of the cross. She's acting as your witness.

It can happen when you tell someone, simply and straightforwardly, why you believe what you believe, why a faith that pivots on a shameful death can not only make sense, but make sense of everything else. If you do that, you're a witness.

But however it happens, let's make no mistake that this "believing" that John is after is not merely head knowledge: believing *that* a whole lot of things are true. It's not a *theory* that makes sense of the world as a whole, it's a *Person*. Unlike the dad with his little boy, what's being pointed to is not a thing (like snow), but a Person, a living Person, who went to his death for you.

I leave you with perhaps the most famous painting of a pointing finger; Matthias Grünewald's painting of the crucifixion. John the Baptist points to the crucified Jesus. The text next to him reads: "Behold, the Lamb of God."

