

Advent 2 Year A 8th Dec 2019

Matthew 3:1-12

Contemplatio: Michael Wood

Last week, on the first week of Advent we began to reflect on the nature of WAITING.

Today this theme is developed by focussing on John the Baptist and begins with the question of WHO and WHAT John was waiting for as he called the people out to the River Jordan and asked them to turn their hearts around.

WHO or WHAT we are waiting FOR, is worth asking because there is now a well recognised phenomenon in psychology that what we expect tends towards a self-fulfilling prophecy. Once we have made up our mind we tend to (unconsciously) seek information which supports the position we've come to and we screen out information which would challenge our assumptions. We can easily recognise this phenomenon when we go to the supermarket to, say, buy toothpaste. We march with single minded focus to the toothpaste isle and then focus in on our preferred brand. Nearly everything else in the store gets filtered out of our awareness. Nowadays it's not just our brain which does this, but also the algorithms of Facebook. Once Facebook figures out our preferences it then feeds us more of the same.

John the Baptist had a particular narrative running in his mind about what the Messiah would be like which was informed by the history of the Jewish people. If we read the broad thrust and direction of the Hebrew Scriptures, what we find is a particular people who are called by God to be a light and blessing to the nations (Gen 12:2 Isa 49:6) – to open eyes that are blind, to free the captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those that sit in darkness (Isa 42:7). When the people fail to realise that vision, it was the prophets who recalled the Jewish people to their founding mission.

The prophets were usually rather eccentric characters – ec-centric - meaning – *out of the centre*. John the Baptist did not preach in the middle of Jerusalem – he preached out in the desert – out of town – out of the centres of the corridors of power. He called people OUT of the city to be baptised in the River Jordan (just as an aside, the Ec-lesia, the church is a people **called out** from one way of living, into an alternative way of living)

The place that John conducted his ministry is extremely significant – because the Jewish people had originally crossed *into* the promised land through the River Jordan (Joshua 1:2). They had crossed entirely at the mercy of God – with no power, no status, and no land beyond just an almost unbelievable promise.

John strips back his life to the bare bones, lives in the desert, wears camel's hair, eats bugs and threatens the unconverted with fiery judgement. John's ministry has a strong apocalyptic flavour. Apocalyptic is a way of thinking which comes out of desperation. Things have become so desperate that the only thing for it is for God to dramatically intervene in human history to make everything right – by rewarding the righteous and destroying the evil. As John put's it, the axe is lying at the foot of the tree. The wheat (good people) would be taken into the barn, but the chaff (bad people) would be burned in unquenchable fire. For John, Jesus was just the guy to do the job. This was the expectation that John was running in his mind. This is what he WAITED for.

John's theology is formed by the common understanding in much of history across many religious traditions, that holiness is principally about "separation". Evil is dealt with by casting it out of the community, or casting it out of ourselves – symbolically this was done by loading all the people's sins on the back of a sacrificial animal and either driving it into the wilderness, or burning it in a fire. From this we have the idea of the scapegoat – the one who carries away the sins of the community; or the sacrifice of an animal on an altar and the sprinkling of blood as a symbol of the purification of the people.

It's a reasonably effective psychology..... unless you're the goat – or unless you have become a human scapegoat upon which a community has turned its eyes.

It's on this point that John and Jesus part company in their language and practice. It's true that Jesus does occasionally borrow apocalyptic language, and Paul's writing clearly has an apocalyptic flavour, but the New Testaments radically re-works the nature of God's radical transformation of the world. To summarise it in one sentence,

John defined the Kingdom by who would be EXCLUDED from it, whereas Jesus defined the Kingdom by who would be INCLUDED in it.

Jesus' style of ministry is different to John's. It's true that Jesus gets just as fired up by injustice as John does, but Jesus practices an *alternative vision of the [eschatological] future*. Jesus actually ENACTS what a Kingdom of inclusion will be like. And in **enacting** the vision of the Kingdom, Jesus begins to bring it into concrete form in his day, and, by the power of the Spirit, in our day.

Jesus message of inclusion is *enacted*. It's not just words. Jesus message of inclusion is enacted in *whom* Jesus eats with. And he eats well. In contrast to John the Baptist eating locusts, the first sign which Jesus gives is to produce 600 litres of Grange Hermitage. Wine was a symbol of Joy.

And Jesus message of inclusion is *enacted* in the great reversal which is the cross. Rather than sacrificing someone else - creating a scapegoat to achieve community solidarity, Jesus *becomes* the scapegoat. Rather than being a high priest who *kills* animals on an altar, Jesus takes the place of the sacrificial paschal lamb, slaughtered, not by divine wrath but by the wrath of law abiding citizens. In doing so, Jesus undoes all sacrificial human victim-making. Jesus undoes religion.

The alter of the Christian community is completely unique in the history of religions. This table signifies the INCLUSION by God of all people who seek God's mercy. As the Prophet Isaiah says:

"Ho – everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves with rich food" (Isaiah 55:1-2)

As a colleague of mine once put so well in one of his Advent Sermons:

"God has tables all over the countryside, right across the world, and Christ is really present wherever love turns on a celebration" (David Wood; Advent Sermons, 2000).

John waited for a violent apocalyptic God, but what John, and us, actually got was the great overturning – a God shaped like a man crucified and risen and unconditionally forgiving. This IS the God for whom we wait, and who is already with us.