

Sermon for the Third Sunday in Advent 13th December 2020
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When the world outside becomes beyond our understanding and control it is natural to look inwards and to bring into order the things that we do have some power over. I wonder how many gardens, attics and sock drawers have benefited from this urge this year. In the same way, I do not think it surprising that Personality Tests have been very popular. True Personality Tests are tools for identifying aptitudes and attitudes, with often a view to either finding a suitable job or for an employer to find a good fit for a certain role. The ones that are popular online at the moment are more like glorified quizzes. Bit like the ones you used to get in magazines: “What your handbag says about you!” – or your sock drawer. It is fun reading about ourselves – having “scientific” explanations for our responses and preferences. There is great value in working out how to get the best out of ourselves and our lives – and such tests have their place.

But what has this to do with the mighty words we have just heard from the prophet Isaiah and John the Evangelist’s account of John the Baptist? Well, something about how we understand ourselves, our personalities and our aptitudes.

The beautiful voice of Isaiah echoes though our Advent readings and preparations. His book is long and varied in tone and most likely in authorship. We do not know very much about him, but we do know why he becomes the one who speaks God’s good news of the coming Messiah. Isaiah tells us in an earlier passage, that God appeared to him in a vision setting out his need for a voice to speak his message. “Whom shall I send?” God asks, and Isaiah answers, “Send me”. This morning in a passage of extraordinary power Isaiah fulfils God’s sending by proclaiming His message: “The spirit of the Lord is upon me ...to bring good news to the oppressed.” To speak the promise of the one who is to come, who shall bind up the broken-hearted and set the prisoners free.” Jesus. Emmanuel. God with us.

And in our Gospel today we hear that “There was a man sent from God whose name was John.” He is not the expected one but he has come to prepare his way. John the Baptist quotes the prophet Isaiah “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness. John the Baptist is the man who

stands at the hinge of history. Isaiah points across the centuries; John points across the Jordan. To the one who that very hour is healing the broken-hearted and setting men and women free from all that binds them. Jesus, Emanuel. God with us.

This is great task proclaiming God's Messiah. Being the messenger of such glad life-changing news. What were the personalities and aptitudes of these men that they did this? We might make some guesses from the things we are told about them, but I think if we were able to ask Isaiah and John about their personalities and aptitudes they would be very puzzled. This is not just because their days were so different to ours, because we understand so much more about psychology and the self, but because they would not understand the point of the question. For each of them the point is not the messenger but the message.

John and Isaiah would I think have described what they did as a calling or perhaps a sending. They would have described their skills and personal aptitudes as gifts. Gifts from the same God who called and sent them. They trusted that God had given them – would give them – the gifts to do his will.

Although the Bible and Christian life abound with stories of people who initially look unlikely candidates for the role God calls them to – David, St Paul – God does of course know what he is doing. It takes a David to kill Goliath. It takes a Paul to take on the world. There is nothing he calls us to today that he will not equip us for.

One of the greatest differences between our age and that of Isaiah, of David of John, of Paul is the loss of connection between the gifts we have been given and the God who gave them to us

The word gift strongly indicates that there is a giver, yet we so often act and speak as though these gifts were self-given and for our own discretionary use. Perhaps we have been grudging with these gifts – called “ours” that which we were given to share.

God is not dismissive of aptitude and personality. He made us and he loves us. It is he that has given us our gifts. There is nothing in us God wastes. We are “fearfully and wonderfully made.”

But the reason we are made as we are and we have the gifts we have is that, like the talents in the parable, they should be nurtured and developed and GIVEN. Given in our service to him and to one another. For the spirit of the Lord to be upon us to, to be sent and led and held by him to give what we were born to give. The point of the messenger IS the message AND its sender.

Advent is a good time perhaps to do a personality test but an even better time for a recognition of gifts. To recognize the gifts we have been given and what the one who gave them to us is sending us to do. Preparing our lives and our hearts to greet again in the manger God's greatest gift of all. Jesus. Emanuel. God with us. Amen.