

Sermon for the Third Sunday in Advent 17th December 2017

Susan Peatfield, Reader

I woke up one morning this week to the voice of Nick Robinson the Radio 4 Today programme presenter reporting from Lambeth Palace, London home of the Archbishop of Canterbury. Nick chirpily informed us that there are more members of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds than there are regular attenders of Church of England services. Now, this made me think many things, starting with retuning the alarm to Radio 3, but mainly about the nature of membership.

"A gift for the person who has everything" is how various organisations from the Victoria and Albert to the Steam Museum - and I don't doubt the RSPB - advertise their membership opportunities. They are of course good ways of supporting these worth charities and institutions but I think we all know the real appeal of membership. I hold a few of these membership cards in my purse and great is the inner joy in striding to the front of the queue as a specially entitled one, resting elegantly in the members' room with a coffee where I can see other people queuing. Recently, in a rather crowded members' room where I had to queue for coffee. I had the unworthy but powerful thought that there might be too many special ones for comfort. Oh dear - an Advent confession.

Today the Third Sunday in Advent we meet again with John the Baptist and John the Baptist had thoughts about membership too. For John was a special one. The story of his parents Elizabeth and Zachariah is a key part of the Christmas story. So long they wanted and waited for a child and finally while Zachariah is on priestly duty in the temple an angel tells him that their prayer has been answered. Zachariah is incredulous - Elizabeth is past child-bearing age surely - and Zachariah is literally rendered speechless until his baby boy is named. Elizabeth is overjoyed with this late blessing and has no hesitation in giving him the name chosen for him by God - John. Beautiful name with a beautiful meaning, from the Hebrew for "God is gracious", or, "Gift of God".

Later in the same Gospel account we hear how John leapt within his mother's womb when Mary visits with her news and presence of Christ. Later we hear Zachariah proclaim that his son "will be called the prophet of the most high, for you will go before the Lord and prepare his way." But these are not the reasons John is special in the Jewish community of his time.

John is special to them simply because he is Zachariah's son. Zachariah is a priest - a Levite, a descendent of Aaron - and so, as this can only be inherited and not chosen or ordained, is John. Or at least his status is that of the priestly class. John has membership of an extremely exclusive organisation.

And this is why in the reading from John's Gospel we heard today other priests and members of this select group come to see what he thinks he is up to by the River Jordan. News has obviously reached Jerusalem that one of their number is doing and saying things out of line with Jewish priestly actions and understanding.

What actually is he doing? Pictures we might have in our mind of John are often a combination of images based on the glimpses the Gospel accounts give us. Clothed in camel hair, eating a diet of locusts and wild honey, preaching repentance of sins gives, us the impression of a figure on the margins of society. Easy perhaps to understand why he might raise eyebrows. But I do not think this is why his interrogators come from Jerusalem to see him. It is not so much how he dresses and lives or even so much what he says. It is what he does. Who he is - in the name he has come down to us: John the Baptist. For John baptises other Jews.

This is unheard of - baptism represents an extreme form of ritual washing. Only Gentiles - non-Jews - are admitted to membership of the Jewish faith by baptism. A Jewish person has no need of baptism for he

or she is by birthright "clean". Yet, near Bethany on the Jordan John is inviting true repentance and washing away of sins and Jewish people are responding by entering the waters of Jordan and emerging with a new story to tell. Something new is happening. What is going on? How can it be that the membership they have of God's chosen people is being challenged and questioned?

This explains I think the questions John is asked in our Gospel passage today:

"Who are you?" John rightly guesses that they mean - "Are you calling yourself the Messiah? - as some of your followers seem to say you are." No, answers John, he is not the one who is promised by God to save all from their sins.

"Are you Elijah?" No, answers John, he is not the returned prophet of the time of the Kings of Israel - although he resembles him.

"Are you the prophet?" No, answers John, he is not a returned Isaiah or Jeremiah nor the prophet referred to by Moses who will raise up his people. (There is lots to say in terms of background of Jewish theology and history here but the gist is - "By whose authority are you doing this?!")

Well then, say his questioners if you are not the Messiah, or Elijah or the prophet how dare you baptise! John is not so much a prophet as he is the fulfilment of prophecy. He prepares the way as foretold to the one who will bring a whole new story for all humanity. John points to Jesus. In all he is and all he says and in all he does.

John is the witness to a world-changing truth held in life-changing choices. By each man and woman by the Jordan recognising that for the world to change it begins with them first. No inherited entitlement or birthright or membership but a choice open to all. Choosing life with the one whose sandal John is unworthy to untie. The same one who three years later, the night before he dies, unties the sandals of fishermen to wash their feet. The one who in a week's time we shall remember being born in a stable because there was no room for him at the inn. Jesus, who said "Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." Jesus, who will bring to real life in real people the promises made by all the prophets: good news to the oppressed, liberty to captives, comfort to the broken-hearted. And we should be encouraged when we think of grim statistics about church attendance - not that it does not matter for it does - but that all over the world in their millions upon millions people are living and trusting in Christ and seeing lives transformed.

A world turned upside down. So, put simply, being a follower of Christ is not like being a member of the RSPB. If it starts to feel like it - if it starts to feel as stiff and smug and laminated as a membership card - then it needs to be looked at again. This third Sunday in Advent we light a candle to remember the witness of John. The voice crying in the wilderness and claim his message as our own. We have just said together: We receive the light of challenge, acknowledging that much needs to change, in our lives, in our attitudes, our choices and in our world.

May that light shine brightly in us this week and may we be the people who have been given everything and know it to be a gift. And, as we prepare to kneel at the manger may we know too that there we shall meet Christ's warmth and his love and the overwhelming sense of finding ourselves where ^{we} are not only members but where we belong. Amen