

*Sermon preached by the Revd Rachel McDougall
at St Paul's Canterbury,
Advent 3B
13th December, 2020*

This Sunday could be called 'No I'm not Sunday'.

In John's gospel straight after those beautiful words of 'In the beginning was the word' we hear John confess and not deny it but confess that he is not the Messiah.

John could be called John 'No I'm not' rather than John the Baptist. When they ask, 'Who are you?' he is absolutely certain who he isn't, what he's not.

He is clear that he isn't the one looked for. 'No I'm not'.

I can't think of anyone who finds themselves in the limelight who would actually admit what they're not.

In today's society we're all too busy saying what we are, who we are and wanting our 15 minutes of fame into the bargain – pick me! Yes I'm the greatest chef, the best renovator, the best dancer, the best whatever... whether it's true or not!

Here, John the Baptist is in the limelight and he just wants to get out of it.

John the Baptist is clear that he is not the Messiah and he is also clear about who he is.

'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord' is what he says.

John is exactly who God calls him to be, nothing more and nothing less and that is enough.

It's not about him and he actually doesn't seem to mind.

He bears witness to Jesus, stepping back from the limelight and reflects the light forwards.

'It's not about me' he's able to say.

He steps back and points ahead to Jesus as the one, as the centre where all meaning, truth, and light can be found.

We can learn a lot from John the Baptist.

John is comfortable being who he is called to be, the one who points to the future.

This is the same call for us, to be who we are and realise that this is enough. By the gifts we are blessed with we can point the way to God.

With John the Baptist we are called through who we are to be people who bear witness.

We can be heralds of hope, heralds of joy, witnesses to the light, not the light itself.

It isn't about us, it isn't even about the church it is actually about God, and being bearers of good news, bearers of hope through God's grace in us.

We are called always to bring good news to the oppressed, bind up the broken hearted, and liberty the captives.

We are called to point the way to Jesus Christ.

We're made in God's image to reflect God's light, to be bearers of hope and joy and peace.

And what do we bear witness to?

We bear witness to the reality that there is more to life than this. We can speak from our own experience of who God is for us into the reality of the situations people face and speak of hope.

Joy can permeate our very depths, because we know that those who sow in tears will reap in joy, that no matter what darkness of grief or loss we experience we are never separated from God.

We know that we are held and that the ancient ruins will be rebuilt.

It is living in the hope that the darkness is not all there is, that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has never overcome it.

Perhaps we know something of this light bearing when we think of paying it forward.

One of the silver linings of Covid was how much people did this for each other in wearing masks, in the little acts of kindness that meant so much. that we could then in turn, do for someone else.

We are called in this advent season to be active in our waiting, to be preparers of the way.

Desmond Tutu bore witness to the truth in South Africa.

He was a reluctant witness.

He was someone who didn't like conflict,

He found himself returning to South Africa, just as Soweto uprisings began.

Everyone else who'd borne witness to the injustice of Apartheid were in prison or silenced.

There was a vacuum of leadership and suddenly found himself thrust into the role of bearing witness to the sufferings of his people and pointing forwards to a better life for all.

Desmond Tutu talks about the Church of God being the salt and light of the world.

'We are the hope of the hopeless, through the power of God.'

We must transfigure a situation of hate and suspicion, of brokenness and separation, of fear and bitterness.

We have no option.

We are the servants of the God who reigns and cares.

He wants us to be the alternative society; 'Where there is harshness and insensitivity, we must be compassionate and caring; where people are statistics, we must show they count as being of immense value to God; where there is grasping and selfishness, we must be a sharing community now'.

In the early church, people were attracted Christianity by the fact that they saw Christians as a community of people living a new life as if what God had done in Christ was important.

They saw a community of those who, whether poor or rich, male or female, free or slave, young or old – all quite unbelievably loved and cared for each other.

It was the lifestyle of the Christians that was witnessing.'

I wonder what it is about you that points forward to Christ.

What is it about us as a community of faith that points to God's love for all?

May God help us bear witness to truth and light.

May your light shine through us who long for you.

Lectio:
Isaiah 61.1-4, 8-11
Ps 126
John 1.6-8, 19-28