John 1:6-8, 19-28 – Sermon for 10.30am

We’ve got to the third Sunday of Advent season in the run-up to Christmas and we find ourselves in our gospel reading, talking about the enigmatic figure of John the Baptist. Who is he and what does it mean for us that this strangely dressed man with a really odd diet lived so long ago and took people and washed them in a river? How does he relate to our normal “Shepherds, angels, and wise men” type of Christmas story?

“Who is he”, seems the key question. In the reading, the Jews sent a delegation from Jerusalem, asking the same thing. There’s an implicit question about whether John is the “Messiah,” the long-awaited figure that God had promised who would bring freedom and restore Israel in its relationship with God. There had been lots of false hopes shattered with false Messiahs, and because of the politics of the time, there was a mixture of anticipation at God’s Messiah coming, but also anxiety at the effects of political rebellion if they followed yet another false Messiah. It was therefore really important to know who this man John was, and although the question we have is “Who are you?” clearly by John’s response, it had cautious undertones of “Are you the Messiah we’ve been waiting for?”

John’s response translates a bit clunkily, but was absolutely emphatic that he is not the Messiah. There’s probably some disappointment mingled with relief, but this leads to the continuing question of who John is.

Falling back on their Jewish heritage, they ask if John is Elijah the prophet from hundreds of years ago. It was really important to find out if John was Elijah come back from the dead because another prophet called Malachi had said that God would send the Jews the prophet Elijah “before the great and terrible day if the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that God will not come and strike the land with a curse.” So the Jews expected a return of Elijah before a big apocalyptic event. If this was Elijah, then it was really big news and heralded a new world era.

But despite him wearing clothing similar to Elijah, John denies it. He is not Elijah. So the Jews ask again, “Are you the prophet?” This harks way back to a time where the people of Israel were being given their laws by God before they took possession of their land. God said he would raise up for them a prophet like Moses who would lead them and speak God’s words to them. But John isn’t this prophet either.

Confused and exasperated, they ask “who are you? – we need take an answer back to our masters. What do you say about youself?” And at this point John gives his account of himself in verse 23 of the reading:

“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord”.

Here, John quotes the prophet, Isaiah, who predicted the return of the Israelites from their exile in a foreign land. This return became a hope that God would once again return to his people. Here, John is therefore announcing this return. John is crying out in the wilderness and preparing the people by washing them for forgiveness of their sins, and so therefore making the paths straight and smooth for the coming of God himself to his people. John is announcing God’s imminent return.

The Jews then basically ask him by what authority he is baptizing since he is none of these great figures from history. Who does he think he is to be doing this baptizing, this washing away of sin?

John’s response is crucial. Rather than argue about his position and his identity, he simply does what Isaiah said he would do – he points beyond himself at someone greater. He prepares the way for the coming of God himself. John says his baptism is by water, but here there is someone greater than him who he isn’t even worthy of being a slave to. He immediately deflects attention from himself to the one he is preparing for and announcing.

This takes us backwards and forwards at the same time. It takes us back to verses 6-8 of our reading where we are first introduced to John as the one who bore witness to the light, but who was most certainly not himself, the light. His job was to point others to it. This verse makes perfect sense with what has just happened with the Jews. John has just denied being the Messiah, but now points towards the one coming after him.

And we travel forwards as well. If John isn’t the light and isn’t the Messiah, then who is? John was announcing and preparing the way for someone – but who?

And there we have it. We’ve caught up with ourselves in Advent as we wait for Christmas. We are standing on the banks of the river with John and the Jews, waiting for God to return to his people. Waiting for the Messiah. Waiting for Jesus.

And in the rest of the gospel, this just moves us to the next question, which is the most fundamental we can ever ask. Who is Jesus?

Because, for John, Jesus comes as the Messiah: God returning to his people on the highway that John has made straight.

And Jesus will remain the key all through the rest of John’s life. People will continue to ask “Who is this Jesus?” that forgives sins, that heals the sick, that performs miracles, that brings dead people to life, that teaches with an authority unheard of before or since, and who finally gives up his life for the world, and then takes it up again as he burst from the grave to conquer our deepest darkest fears and destinies. The question “Who is Jesus?” is the key to understanding Jesus’ life, but also the key to our own lives. Who do we say Jesus is? Who do we believe he is?

For John, the way needs to be cleared, and perhaps that is our job this Advent – to clear the way in our lives for God to return to us and take up residence in us. Perhaps we need to think again, or think for the first time about who this Jesus is? Perhaps we need to look to the light of God who is willing to live among us, even in the darkness of Covid, if we’d only open up the road to enable that to happen?

Today, we have John the Baptist, the one assigned to make things ready for Jesus’ coming, pointing beyond himself to the coming one who is far greater than we can imagine or dream. For those of us who are Christians, this is our purpose too. None of us are Elijah, the prophet, or our own little Messiah. Instead, we are pointers who prepare the way for God to return to his people. We prepare the way by the way we live, by God’s love that we share, and also by telling people we know about the Good News that God has indeed come to live with his people, and wants to live with each of us. So in Jesus name, and following John’s example, let us cry out in the spiritual wilderness that we live in and make easy and straight the way of the Lord into each and every person we meet. Amen.