

Open to Scrutiny

A sermon for Sunday 10th December, 2006, the second Sunday of Advent.



John the Baptist has never been really understood or indeed loved as a figure in the New Testament. His message seemed to contain a threat to ordinary people and, as we will read next Sunday, even a sense of resentment about those who responded to him, as though he didn't want them to be forgiven.

So, he was not then and is not now an attractive or comfortable religious figure. He gets a sympathy vote when he becomes the victim of Herod's foolish promise to a dancer, but on the whole, he is difficult to deal with and difficult to place in the Christian scheme of things.

His message was unrelentingly abrasive. Nobody likes that quality in their religious leader! In some parts of the Christian tradition, we have grown up to see Jesus as gentle, meek and mild, a "fairy liquid type man" surrounded by children, bunny rabbits and flowers, in touch with his feminine side and fully in tune with motherhood and apple pie.

The real picture of Jesus which emerges when you look at the whole person, is, of course, quite different. He could at times use aggressive language, calling people vipers and hypocrites. He used physical force to clear out the money-changers in the Temple. His message contained the news that he had not come to bring peace but a sword. He predicted family disloyalty leading to death and suffering. He lived an arduous life as an itinerant preacher and died after severe beating, nailed to a cross by foreign soldiery.

The real picture of Jesus Christ is of a man with a strong mind, a tough body, a desire for direct action and a man willing to take the risk of confronting the terrifying power of Imperial Rome, with its shocking excesses and cruelties.

In some way, as you may think, John the Baptist and Jesus were much more alike than the tradition has led us to believe. They were in fact cousins. They preached a similar message of repentance and reformation of life. And they both died cruel deaths at the hands of powerful and despotic rulers.

But, how relevant is all this to us and to our contemporaries? That is the big question which faces every Christian generation. We know by our study of history that most of the really good and lasting things in our culture have been inspired by the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. These good things may be summarised as the priority of education, the deep concern for human well-being which gave rise to medicine and hospitals for all, a sense of justice which fuels our laws and justice system, a care for the needy which is given expression in social services of many kinds for young and old alike. We look back and see how these things can be traced through history to the inspiration in the Gospels.

The problem for 21st century people is how to get into the mind of Jesus again in order to find there for us the source of inspiration for our future human life which our predecessors and ancestors were able to find for theirs. If we fail to make the connections, we may lose these qualities which are so important to us.

Amid all the talk of the secularisation of Britain and the bid by humanist thinkers to push public expressions of religious faith out of the public view, perhaps one of the simplest problems facing us is just how difficult it is to understand and gain access to the depth of the story of Jesus from the distance of 2000 years.

Our problem is made worse because unlike previous generations, we live in an age which demands from public figures and events an immediate scrutiny, the advance publication of success criteria and clear

verification methods for all claims and proclamations. We do not like leaving things on trust or giving others the benefit of the doubt. We want to see the real story, the gory details, and see them unedited for us, preferable on live television, so that we can make our own minds up, and not rely on others to report to us.

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When seen in the light of this cauldron of modernity, most religions, including Christianity, fit uncomfortably and seem to lack realism. But what does fit comfortably with modernity? What satisfies us today? Are you satisfied by reality T.V. shows purporting to show celebrities out in the jungle somewhere? Or the Big Brother house where almost every bowel motion is counted and observed?

In reality, none of these television shows depict what they say they do. The shows are staged and unrealistic and because the players in the game

are very carefully selected, they do not show us real life at all, but life as though seen through those concave and convex mirrors which exaggerate one's shape and size at fairgrounds.

Christians remain convinced of the godly nature of human life, its sacred quality, which we find in the teaching of Jesus and that is why we promote the teaching of Jesus Christ. In this respect, we can join forces in campaigns and causes with others who do not share our faith because in the end, human safety and fulfilment are more important than clinging to tenets of religion, but we must stand up to those who wish to push religion out of sight and who denigrate it as all negative. Of course religions have been negative and murderous at times, because they have been interpreted by human beings with all kinds of problems and human weaknesses, control-freaks and the power-hungry. We can agree on that, but we must resist the accusation that religion as such brings out the human negativity that leads to war and violence. Wherever there have been attempts at non-religious society, the human issues have always emerged and produced the same results in the name of some ideology or other. Remember the Gulags, the Stalinist purges, the Nazi death camps... The rejection of the true values of religion is not a panacea for human happiness as some are suggesting. On the contrary, it may require throwing out the baby with the bath water.

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We remember that Christianity starts with the birth of a defenceless child whose life ends in a powerless death on the cross. That is the true Christian model, the real Christian ethos- a defenceless and powerless life which transformed the world and can still transform it when it is not used by the aggressive or power-hungry.

Let us make this defenceless and powerless figure the object of our thinking as we meet the problems and issues of our life, and let him make all the difference.

Rembrandt van Rijn

Neil Richardson