

Bush Clearing — John the Baptist

Readings: Isaiah chapter 40, verses 1-5; Luke chapter 3, verses 1-14

On the third Sun in Advent, the Church traditionally focuses its thinking on John the Baptist. And I think that his message and his role is crucially important for the Church today. John was not the Christ — and he went to great lengths to point that out. His job was preliminary. John was called to be a *Forerunner*; to go ahead and “prepare the way of the Lord”. That’s our job too.

By way of setting the scene I offer you two instances.

Way back in the 40s and 50s William Sangster was minister at the Methodist Central Hall in Westminster. He regularly had a congregation of 3000 on a Sunday evening and was famed as an evangelist. The Methodist Church decided that his evangelistic ministry should not be confined to Westminster and he was appointed to a roving commission — evangelise Great Britain! At the end of his first year Sangster reported back and said that Britain wasn’t ready to be evangelised. To everybody’s shock he argued that a prior ministry was required. What was needed was for someone to prepare the way; in technical language Britain needed an Apologist, not an Evangelist. And he devoted the rest of his ministry to this preliminary task.

My other instance comes from Zimbabwe. Back in the 1950s it was decided to dam the Zambezi River at Kariba. The proposed dam would stretch back 100 miles and create a great inland sea. That meant moving thousands of people from the Zambezi Valley. It meant a Noah’s Ark operation to save the animals. And it involved clearing vast tracts of bush from the valley floor. What they did was get a number of huge bulldozers; link them in pairs with massive balls and chains and drag them through the bush flattening everything in their path. Bush clearing on a mammoth scale.

That’s what’s needed in Britain today. We are supposed to have a Christian heritage behind us but the truth is that Christianity has been obfuscated and distorted to such an extent that a clearing-out exercise is needed. The Christian Faith has become inextricably entangled with so much other stuff and in the minds of people out there, there is so much confusion and misunderstanding and misapprehension that the Gospel doesn’t have a chance. Before we start evangelising there is need to cut through and cut away the tangled undergrowth of ignorance and distortion and misunderstanding associated with Christianity.

I give you one example. When I was minister in Harare a lady came to ask if I would baptise their daughter. They had had no contact with the Church. I made an appointment to talk to her and her husband and during the course of the conversation he volunteered why I wouldn’t see him in church. “You cant expect me to believe the rubbish Christians believe”. I asked “What rubbish?”. He said “Stuff like believing a whale swallowed Jonah; and that the sun was supposed to have stood still for 24 hours so that the Hebrews could complete the massacre of their enemies”. I told him I didn’t believe such rubbish either. That was the beginning of some fairly long sessions. He started coming to Church. He got involved. He made a commitment. Five years later he became our senior Church steward and used his lawyer’s expertise to draw up a constitution for a joint Methodist / Anglican congregation.

For him the starting point was getting a basic misunderstanding about the Christian Faith cleared up.

And so it is for very many people out there. For many of them their only point of contact with the Church was years ago in Sunday School. They remember stories about the Garden of Eden; the Flood and Noah’s Ark, David and Goliath; Daniel in the lions den — all these make great kid’s stories but they are not the kernel of Christian Faith.

These days most people don't even have that Sunday School background. And the misconceptions are all the greater. They assume that science and religion are impossible to reconcile and that you either believe the science of evolution or the Biblical account of creation in 6 days. They assume that Christianity is all about morals — and a Victorian morality at that. Assumption is piled on assumption and all of them faulty. The result is that Christianity doesn't even get a hearing and is rejected before we even start the discussion.

That's where John the Baptist comes in. His job was to prepare the way of the Lord. To make a highway in the desert for the coming of God. And that's our job too. In fact it's harder for us. John didn't have to deal with atheists and agnostics and new-age religionists. We do.

But there is this final parallel with John Baptist. He cleared the way and he did so by challenging the life-style of the people. His own life-style was austere but it was authentic. He hit out against the hypocrisy of the religious folks; he advocated a sharing of possessions; he castigated exploitation by people with power. All this was preparatory to what Jesus said and he went so much further.

So, too, for us. In the horrible jargonese of today we must "walk the talk". It is no use proclaiming the Truth if we do not speak the Truth in love. Respect for others precludes us from ridiculing what they say. To be accepting of them means that we do not judge or exclude them.

So I come back to John the Baptist. His was a preliminary ministry: that of preparing the way of the Lord. Yet it is a ministry that is still needed today even though we must go beyond it. For the Christ has come. And still comes into the hearts and lives of people today. May it be that this Christmas-time Christ will be born again into lives prepared for His coming.