

Listen to the baptiser
A sermon preached on the
Feast of the Baptism of Christ
14 January 2018
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH
CAMBERWELL
by
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the lections: Genesis 1: 1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19: 1-7; Mark 1: 4-11

The lord has come! So why bother with a messenger telling us what we already know? Why do we keep coming back to John the Baptist? Why not just forget about him? He had a job—he did it—he announced the coming of Christ. We appreciate his role—thank you and goodbye! The reality is, however, we need John the Baptist. But, why?

The short answer is —because God is a mystery—and John helps us penetrate that mystery. To say that God is a mystery won't come as a surprise. That God doesn't make God obvious must be the understatement of all time. We can point to a bus or a tram, and say 'that is a bus or a tram'; but we cannot point to God and say, 'that's God.' God is hidden. Like a treasure buried in a field. Like an invaluable pearl jumbled up with hundreds of ordinary ones. Waiting for us to stumble across God. And this is the way that God seems to want it. Which makes us ask, why is this so? Is it that for God to be God, God needs to be unknowable? Is the fullness of God something which is always kept from us, leaving us to be content only with hints, suggestions, glimpses, but never seeing more than the backside of God?

Wait a moment we say. We have Jesus. The Christ. And this Christ is the figure of God. Trouble is, this Christ, albeit a figure, is a figure that nevertheless moves unobtrusively in the shadows. He was urged to come out of the shadows, but ventured only reluctantly into the light, and remained tantalisingly opaque. He was urged to let everyone know who he was. But he didn't. His disciples urged him to impress people with his power and authority. But he didn't. He said he would call up legions of angels. But he didn't. He was challenged to come down from the cross. But he didn't. So our vision of Christ is frustratingly blurred, and God remains for us more of a mystery than we would like.

Yet surely we can say this—if there is a God, it is reasonable to assume that this God communicates. Because if God did not communicate, then we would have no hope of knowing whether there was anything there or not. If God doesn't get to us, somehow, then God may just as well not exist.

For God to be, then, God must speak. Somehow. But how does this God communicate? How does God get through to us? Through worship, we might say. Through works of beauty. There are many avenues for experiencing the holy, for perceiving the element of transcendence which lies beyond the ordinary and the mundane. The types and shadows of God fill our lives.

But there is another important way God comes to us. It is through other people. We do not seem to be able to connect with God by direct access or clear, open vision. At least, that has been my experience. I have never seen God. I have seen godliness in other people. To that extent I suppose it could be said that I have seen God. But not direct.

Now it might be completely different for some of you. Maybe you have seen God straight-up, clear as day, luminous, person to person, and direct. If this is so, you are truly blessed. And you must be patient with those of us for whom this has not been the case—those of us who rely on others for glimpses and insights into the reality of the divine.

Which is why, for many of us, that John the Baptist is important. He is someone we can get a feel for. For a start, we know more personally about John than we do about Jesus. We know what John the Baptist wore and ate, but we know nothing about the clothes and diet of Jesus. By the same token, the disciples come across to us more clearly than Jesus does.

In Mark's gospel account, at the resurrection, we learn something of the young man who wore a white robe. But we are told nothing of the specific appearance of the risen Lord.

And while we can build up a fairly clear picture of each of the four gospel writers, the person of Jesus himself is not easy to pin down. So it is important for us to be able to know John the Baptist who, like all other agents of God through whom we believe, points us to the Christ, and tells us about him.

People do not usually come to Christianity cold. Out of the blue. If they do so, it's often a flash in the pan. After a short time, they walk away, and turn elsewhere in a continuing search for emotional security, intellectual satisfaction, or whatever.

However, for people to come to a firm and lasting understanding of the fullness, graciousness and generosity of Christianity, and of its innate capacity to transform lives for good, what's needed are opportunities to recognise God in others. And this will emerge most naturally in relationships with others in the Christian community. Relationships of trust, support and forgiveness. Relationships where the importance of human flourishing is seen embodied in the person of Jesus, the Christ.

So we give thanks for John. He makes it possible for us to recognise Christ. He adds to our perception and understanding of Jesus. He shares with us a fuller understanding of the nature of God. And his method is simple. Instantly he perceives that which is of God in Jesus. And he tells us what he sees. So we need to listen to what he says.

And there are many others today who tell us what they see, and we have to go on listening to them, attentively and gratefully, because for the present, Christ stands in the shadow, and we need the help and insight and inspiration of others until that time when finally we meet him face to face.