

Sunday 17th December 2017
3rd Sunday in Advent (B)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Isaiah 61.1-4,8-end
NT: I Thessalonians 5:16-24
G: John 1.6-8,19-28

What links Bill Oddie to Ruby Wax, not a lot I can hear you say, if was to say that the connection stretches over 13 years, and in between the two are another 128 personalities.

On the 12th October 2004 Bill Oddie was the first and on the 4th October last Ruby Wax the latest celebrity to respond to the question **“Who do you think you are?”**

“Who do you think you are” the television phenomena that traces the genealogy of the various celebrities is a fascinating and compelling programme providing insight not just into the life of the person but into the context and lives of previous generations. So, compelling is this fascination into a person’s heritage that the programme has been sold into over 17 countries and has no end to the number of people that want to take part.

Who doesn’t want to find out who they are, a whole industry has developed around tracing family trees including apps that allow you to access parish records, censuses, birth death and marriage certificates for a small monthly subscription you can trace back centuries. Be careful it is addictive. Who do you think you are?

This Sunday as we come to the third Sunday in Advent we continue to prepare ourselves for the coming King, the Incarnate God Jesus Christ. In this season of Advent, we have heard that we must be awake to the coming king, we must be prepared for the coming king and now today.

I want to suggest that we need also be witnesses with a clear understanding of who we are, witnesses prepared to testify to the good news that the Christ child brings to each one of us and to the world. This third Sunday in advent **“Gaudete Sunday”** the words referenced in

Philippians 4:4 “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice. And heard again in the second reading this morning I Thessalonians 5:16-24

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.

Who do you think that you are as Christians we need to know exactly who we are, we are called to be witnesses to the good news that comes in the birth of Jesus Christ.

In the opening from John’s gospel that we have just heard, the gospel writer wanted those who heard his gospel to be clear about the good news and about the identity of Jesus through the use of witnesses, the first witness John the Baptist.

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing any of us if we are to witness is to ‘know’ ourselves. It is so difficult for us to see ourselves as we truly are. Indeed, many great spiritual writers – for example, the monk Thomas Merton, and the pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer – claim that we can only see ourselves clearly in relation to God. As we come to know God better, we slowly begin to see ourselves more clearly. This, they suggest, is the wellspring of true humility. For humility is not about putting yourself down, but seeing yourself more honestly as you are.

The experience of John the Baptizer in this week’s reading from John’s Gospel is a salutary reminder of this. He is the first witness to Jesus, to the one who is the very presence of God. But the impressive thing about John is his clarity about who he is not. He is, in the deepest sense of the word, ‘humble’. True humility is knowing yourself, and part of that is knowing who you are not. John is bombarded with questions: ‘Are you Elijah?’ ‘Are you the prophet?’ – and so on. He is clearly a remarkable man, because he attracts a lot of attention from a crowd hungry for holiness and blessing. But he is also clear himself that his job is to prepare the way for Jesus, not to build up himself.

So, John points to Jesus, the very Word or truth of God now in human form. As the Gospel of John (different John!) puts it in a passage the lectionary presents to us on Christmas Day: ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God’ (John

1.1). Jesus is the one who is truly himself, who is truly humble. He is the light to whom John the Baptizer testifies (vv.7-8) – the ‘light of the world’ who shows up the world in its true light, illuminating all its shadows and its darkness, and revealing all its wonder. But Jesus does not come merely to show us our limitations; he comes to invite us into a new way of living. This new way of living is about coming home from exile and being at peace with our truest selves.

Today’s reading from Isaiah is especially striking. Isaiah’s words connect us directly to those who heard, at first hand, Jesus’ voice – to the moment (recorded in Luke’s Gospel) where he reads those very words. Hear them as an invitation to reconnect with the oral tradition that would have been familiar to people in the first-century synagogue. Having heard the Scriptures read to them, the gathered assembly would have been called to respond – just as we are today.

Luke 4:16-30, tells us it was this passage in Isaiah from which Jesus read and preached in the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth. He clearly identified himself as the one sent by God to “bring Good News to the poor, to announce release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who have been bruised, and to proclaim that the year for which everyone has been waiting has come.”

The idea of God’s love extending to gentiles was not acceptable in Isaiah’s day, nor in Jesus’ day. But this passage in Isaiah with its message of planting (v3), re-building (v4) and new growth (v11) –plus freedom (v1) and justice (v8)– was highlighted by Jesus as the core of his message; and has brought solace and hope to many people who, like the gentiles then, have felt excluded and disadvantaged. It was a founder passage for Liberation Theology, especially in South America. There is no shortage today in our country and abroad of people who are experiencing affliction, broken hearts, lack of liberty, bondage of all kinds including slavery and abuse, who long for justice and freedom from robbery and exploitation.

The new age promised in this passage is an inspiration and challenge to those who believe Jesus came to bring in God's kingdom here on earth –a kingdom for all, including those who are excluded for many reasons from society. So if we are called to be witnesses to this kingdom what are we to do, we are called to be awake, be prepared and to be holy

What is holiness? Is it cutting ourselves off from all taint of sin and evil? Is it about keeping ourselves separate, apart, clean? This was the prevailing view of holiness in New Testament times – but it is challenged by John and Jesus. Instead of the touch of the impure tainting the pure, John and Jesus turn the image on its head: baptism sanctifies the profane, and makes holy the unholy.

The first step to changing ourselves is ruthless and radical honesty, which is painful but ultimately cleansing. Do we have a good idea of who we really are? It requires humility. True humility is not about comparing ourselves to others, putting ourselves down, or seeing others as better than us. True humility is about accepting ourselves as we are – and others as they are. It is about being secure in ourselves and our relationship with God. Only then can we be the effective witnesses to the good news of the gospel, the good news that the coming king is to each of us and to our world crying out for that good news.

Our prayer on this 3rd Sunday in Advent, this Gaudete Sunday let us rejoice that we can know who we are and live our lives in that knowledge.

Fr Bill Addy