

**Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> December 2018**  
**Advent 3 (C)**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**OT: Zephaniah 3.14-20**

**NT: Philippians 4.4-7**

**G: Luke 3.7-18**

Comparison and juxtaposition. These are the tragedies of the human condition. If you are a teenager looking at Instagram, or a middle-aged executive looking at a salary statement, the person next to you often seems to be better or worse, or more deserving or less deserving. Contentment is often something achieved when we step out of our world, our community, rather than when we are in it. Today we continue with the story of John the Baptist: he was counter-cultural in many ways – not least his peculiar clothing. But setting aside the camel-hair, he is striking because his ministry was about reflection and avoidance. Not him, but Jesus. We heard today: “One who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals.” The Baptist often strikes me as being more of a literary foil than a real character: his position in the narrative is one of Lewis to Morse, or Piglet to Pooh, or Watson to Holmes. A literary figure needs a counterpart to reveal his qualities or significance.

And if you ask yourself whether you like the character of John the Baptist, I think we have to admit that there is not enough depth in his portrayal to make a judgement. He is there only to point the way. Who is he? But comparison and juxtaposition do not fade there. Who are we? Who are you? In fact our theological understanding of ourselves is often only by comparison. We are made in the image of God. Jesus is the perfection of humanity. God has come down amongst us. We are like the child in Bethlehem. These are all words and phrases which we might use to talk about humanity. Are we, therefore, only defined against each other, or are we unique and individual ourselves?

Of course the answer is both, but today's Gospel sets us not just in comparison with others, but also in relationship with them. We heard today: "The crowds asked [Jesus], 'What then should we do?' In reply he said to them, 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.' Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?'" In an age when we feel we are bounced into taking political colours, there is something a bit left-ist in this, suggesting that we are obliged to share in common what we have... and yet there is something a bit right-ist as well, echoing One Nation Conservatism which calls all classes to recognize their responsibilities towards each other. But to try and define Christianity by political party is fool-hardy: as often as people try and make Jesus political, so they discover that there is a contradiction. For some, he is a pacifist, yet our first reading speaks of God as a warrior giving victory; for others he is a revolutionary, yet he advocates paying taxes and submitting to the oppressor; and yet for others he is the victim, who continually sides with those who are downtrodden, and yet he is the one who escapes his detractors and eventually overcomes death itself. Whatever you make of Jesus, he will undermine, overcome, and subvert your expectation.

Advent is our time of preparation, but sometimes we spend so much time thinking about John the Baptist and the idea that something great is coming, that we forget to define our expectations beyond a caricature of a baby in a manger, and the other picture-postcard scenes which history has put before us. Again, it appears to be a matter of comparison against a pre-prepared image. This, of course, is not surprising, as we find it difficult genuinely to think outside the box. Our thoughts are always conditioned by what we know.

So I should like to set you a new image of the birth of God into the world. Instead of saying that John the Baptist is pointing the way to something new which you do not know, I'd like

to suggest that he is pointing towards something which you know already. Let us understand Jesus purely in terms of the known rather than the unknown. We understand that we are made in the image of God, and so we must be like him, so whom will you choose to make you understand the God who is born at Christmas. You have the whole array of humanity before you, and there are many, many possibilities. Will it be Mother Teresa, or Oscar Romero, the unnamed vagrant, or the repentant sinner? Comparison and juxtaposition give us our image of God, but each of us uses these tools to impose our own image of God: whether you want him to wave a red flag, sit alongside the destitute, or condemn your favourite sins, the incarnate God is at your disposal. But comparison and juxtaposition is easiest against the model we know best: the birth of God at Christmas is someone who looks like you. The image of God is something you bear, so what is it in you which most resembles him, and what least resembles him?

We are schooled to say that we are not worthy and we are not Christlike, but that is because it is less challenging to project him on to an image further away. St Paul wrote in our second reading today: "Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near... the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." In the end, Paul says that we are known by our Christlike qualities, so let us recognize Christ through ourselves. This is bolder and more dangerous than it sounds, because it requires honesty and humility. I already know every word I utter which is not Christlike; I already know every thought, prejudice, or condemnation I have which is not Christlike. And so do you, both in me and in yourselves. It is not Christ who condemns, but ourselves. And we are redeemed not by our own efforts, but by the Christlike qualities with which we have been created.

So, what is John the Baptist pointing towards? It is the goodness which Paul recognizes, but

it is also the selflessness for which we strive within ourselves. Christmas is a gaudy and tacky feast, but it is also an imperfect caricature of much of what we seek, which is a time of fellowship, of worship, and of offering to each other. The feast itself has become a reminder of what we seek: the season of goodwill is one when it is culturally normal to talk about putting away condemnation and division; where it is encouraged to help our neighbours. How easily does this come to us?

Jesus is not really a child in a manger – that is an easy picture for us to play with. Jesus is God come amongst us, and it is easy to try and understand God by projecting him into an image we create. But if we look at the image of God we know best, then we find him most easily when we are not trying. When we take up stances and positions, when we posture what we think he should be like, or when we use the Bible to provide evidence for our prejudices, then we are looking outside ourselves: but when we truly empty ourselves to know each other, without the layers of imposed expectation, then we begin to glimpse something of who Jesus is. God is the one from outside who is most like us; and Jesus is all that is good in humanity appearing in human form.

What is John the Baptist pointing towards? Well, maybe he is pointing at something he sees in you. And the challenge at Christmas is to find what he can see. When we can see the image of God, then perhaps we shall be able to recognize God himself.

Fr Crispin Pailing