



Second Sunday in Advent

Sermon by Matthew Wright



Sunday 4 December 2022

READINGS

Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72:1-7,20-21; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

More of Christ and less of me

The closing words of the final book of the Old Testament, the book of Malachi, read “Lo, I will send you the Prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord.” The coming of Elijah as a Messianic, or prefigured Messianic, actor, was expected within Judaism at the time of Jesus. And Jesus tells us, in Matthew 11, that John in fact is the returned Elijah. This goes some way in demonstrating the faithfulness of God in terms of the fulfilment of prophecy.

The focus traditionally, of the second Sunday in Advent, is on John the Baptist. Our caricatured images of him present a wild yet stern ascetic, unkempt in appearance, with fiery gaze, possessed of God’s Spirit to proclaim a message of repentance – wearing a suit of camel’s hair and eating locusts and honey.

While I might be encroaching somewhat on next Sunday’s theme, which is not just John the Baptist, but the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus, it is interesting even at this point, to consider the nature of relationship between John and Jesus, and what we see is that this relationship is a little more nuanced than we at first expect. The traditional version is that John and Jesus were cousins, and that John’s family had a priestly lineage and so, by virtue of familial relations, adding some credentials to Jesus’ own background.

From a more academically critical viewpoint though, it is safe to say that at the start of Jesus’ ministry, he himself had been a disciple of John. This is indicated by the fact of Jesus’ baptism by John, something that signified submission to the teaching of the one doing the baptising. The Gospel writers get terribly embarrassed by this fact because it seems to suggest some level of superiority of John over Jesus and Matthew invents a whole dialogue between John and Jesus to try to rationalise and justify the baptism.

Then while having been John’s disciple, Jesus, at some point, decides to go at it alone. Then, according to the Gospel of John, at a certain point, Jesus starts to gain more popularity than John, he is baptising more acolytes and gaining more disciples. Based on this we might imagine that there was a level of rivalry between Jesus and John. And in fact, John’s disciples say, “Teacher, he was with you across the Jordan, look, he is baptising and all are going after him.”

So in this respect, John’s ministry is didactic and edifying for us, not only in terms of the content of his ministry and preaching, but also in terms of his own demeanour and character. In John’s mind, it was very clear to him that he had a mission. He had been assigned a very particular role with clear parameters – he

was to announce the coming of the Messiah. And it is surely in this capacity that Jesus identifies John as the returned Elijah, thus fulfilling the prophecy in Malachi.

And I suppose this is what we all want, to have some sense of purpose, to have some sense of identity, to have some level of fulfilment, we all want and need a particular role, a particular function, a particular mission or task. On one level this is entirely normal and natural; on another level what invariably happens is that our egos and our constructed identities become so intimately tied up with these – what we perceive essentially to be our vocations or jobs, that when these come to an end, or fail, or take an unexpected turn, it can feel like dying because essentially the constructed self or ego, comes crashing down in a million pieces. As seemingly hard and traumatic as it is, these are strangely and paradoxically opportunities to find out who we truly are in God; to find out our true meaning and purpose and identity.

And maybe this is part of the repentance, the metanoia John is calling us to – the complete change and renewing of mind. I think this is partly what John himself embodies and what he was able to achieve. When confronted with Jesus essentially succeeding him in their ministry in the Jordan valley, he was not threatened, he was not discouraged or dismayed, because he knew that his share or part in God's mission had been achieved.

And so he is able to say ultimately "he, that is Jesus, must increase, I must decrease." There must be more of Christ and less of me. It's all very well to repeat this maxim, harder to see implemented in our lives. Usually, it is only our circumstances that can take us there, that can take us to a place where we can say, "he must increase, I must decrease." This Advent, may we by the grace of God, be provided such opportunities.

Amen