



Third Sunday after Advent

Sermon by Revd Sharmain James



Sunday 17 December 2023

READINGS

Isaiah 61:1-4,8-11; Psalm 126 or Luke 1:46b-55; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8,19-28

Advent 3

Today is the third Sunday of Advent – we are only eight days away from Christmas. Neither the gospel of Mark for last week, nor the gospel of John today - say anything at all about the birth of Christ. How are we supposed to celebrate Christmas when the lectionary readings don't even mention it?

You see - We cannot reach the crib unless we pass through John the Baptist. Before we meet the baby Jesus lying in a manger, we are confronted by the figure of John the Baptist. We can't experience the Joy of Christmas unless we have heard the message of How John evangelised the people about the coming of the Messiah.

But somehow John the Baptist is sidelined in the Christmas celebrations. There are no Christmas hymns dedicated to him. He does not appear in the manger scene, and he does not appear in any Christmas plays. In fact, John the Baptist does not even appear on any Christmas cards.

But in the observance of Advent, the person and message of John the Baptist is significant in our preparation for the celebration of Christmas. Like last Sunday, today the central figure is John the Baptist again, but today it is from John's Gospel (John 1:6-8, 19-28), instead of Mark's.

Today's Gospel tells us that John came to testify to the light – so that all might believe through him. He denies that he is the light, but he came to testify to the light. Yet in John 5:35 – Jesus called John a bright and shining light. "He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. But I have a testimony greater than John's. The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me". In other words – John was a lesser light which was to lead men and women to the greater light – which is Jesus Christ. His role was not to bring in new light but rather to turn the attention of the people to the light already given.

Everything that John is - point to the light and the life of the one who will willingly suffer, die and rise again for the salvation of all. For this John will also give the witness of his life. John was a pointer towards Christ who is coming to the world. His life was centered in Christ. As a witness of truth, John gave up his life for the One Who Is the Light and the Truth. He stood for what he experienced, heard and believed. He conveyed hope to the people that in their midst there would be someone to redeem them from their difficulties and sinfulness.

And yet while witnessing, the Jews sent their priests and Levites from Jerusalem to question him. They wanted to know exactly who John was, what he was doing, and with which authority. He had disturbed

the authorities. Even though today is Gaudete Sunday, the Sunday of Rejoicing— we should allow ourselves to be disturbed also because we, too, easily forget in these hectic days of feasting, shopping what this season is all about.

Who were the Levites and the priest?

They were the self-righteous.

They did not know who John was and why John was baptizing.

They were in the darkness as to the truth.

They were not pointers towards the Light, and they refused to accept the Light.

Prior to John, there were lots of people who were sent to evangelize the world, but the high priests and the religious groups were deaf and blind to the Truth. Nonetheless, among those who knew about Jesus's true nature was Mary, the Blessed Mother who proclaimed the goodness of the Lord. She was the bringer of the Light Who Is Jesus. She carried Him in her womb. She proclaimed about Jesus as the One Who Is merciful, loving and giving Favor to the marginalized.

Even before Mary Isaiah (1st reading) declares: "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to heal the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners – to announce the year of the Lord's favour.

These evangelizers or prophets proclaimed the coming of the Messiah. They lived their lives through the Word, Light and Truth. They offered their lives to give way for the coming of the Messiah Who Is our Ultimate Hope.

The third Sunday of Advent is an invitation to bear witness to Christ and His Light. We are not the light itself, but we are light-bearers. As the children's song reminds us – "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine." This is our mission, to reflect Christ's Light to others.

The season of Advent is not just about preparation for Christmas, it is another opportunity the Church offers us to embrace Christ, who is in our midst already. It is an opportunity to remind ourselves again of who we are in Christ Jesus.

John did not confuse his identity; he knew who he was. He was simply a voice that cries in the wilderness: make a straight way for the Lord. He humbled himself before Christ; in humility, he surrendered to the authority of Christ Jesus. That is what is expected of us today, to surrender to Christ in humility as we celebrate Christmas.

As the Church calls us to rejoice today, let us, like John the Baptist, look beyond ourselves and see ourselves as witnesses to Christ in the world.

Amen