



Third Sunday in Advent

Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright



Sunday 13 December 2020

READINGS

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

The relationship between John and Jesus

The theme in our lectionaries, for the third Sunday in Advent, is *the relationship between John and Jesus*. I'm going to try consider this today and, in doing so, hopefully suggest how it might be relevant for us individually and as a community.

Tradition, that is specifically, Luke's narrative, describes Mary and Elizabeth being related on some level (older translations rendered the Greek *cousins*), meaning that Jesus and John would have shared a similar relation. This familial tie is not really emphasised in any of the other Gospels, nor indeed, later in Luke.

What we know, or at least, can glean from the Gospel narratives, is that the movement which John started, namely proclaiming a baptism of repentance in the wilderness, was an apocalyptic or eschatological movement, similar but not necessarily identical to other movements like the Essenes. John clearly understood himself as a forerunner of something greater. Scholars (e.g. Hughes) have even suggested that, for John, the Coming One, which he prophesied, was none other than God himself. According to Brown, upon John's execution, there was at least a faction of his disciples who proclaimed John's imminent return (or resurrection). This explains why some of the populace could conceivably have thought Jesus was John the Baptist revived (Mark 8:27).

What is important to note about the time in question is that there in fact was a plethora of eschatological ideas floating around. Indeed, on the surface one might be forgiven for thinking the Jews were a somewhat confused bunch when it came to Messianic figures. And this highlights another point. Regardless of which Messianic figure was in question, no one really knew when and how they were to arrive. In the New Testament alone, there is evidence for belief that Elijah was to come, that Jeremiah was to come, that another figure referred to as the Prophet was to come. Of course, the overarching designation for

many of these was often the Messiah. But other eschatological beliefs abounded. Tradition held that both Moses and Enoch were to return at some stage, primarily because the burial of Moses was shrouded in mystery and Enoch, like Elijah, did not die but was translated. Groups such as the Essenes had their own set of eschatological beliefs confessing a coming Teacher of Righteousness, to arise from within their ranks. Perhaps most famously, and controversially, scholars like Bultmann have suggested that Jesus himself, at some point, believed in a coming Son of Man.

While this perhaps does not clarify much, it does at least give us an inkling into the minds of John and Jesus in terms of how they might have understood their own and each other's ministries. We know, for example, that Jesus was a disciple of John the Baptist. To receive baptism by someone in the Ancient Near East meant not just having conferred on oneself whatever the baptism was meant to, it also indicated subservience to the baptiser and entry into their ministry.

Although not usually regarded as historically reliable as the Synoptics, John's Gospel seems to indicate potential competition between John and Jesus. At least the comment by John's disciples – "Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan is baptising and all are going to him!" – can only make sense in light of this.

What seems to have been a likely situation for both the Baptist and Jesus is that, initially, they did not know fully what eschatological role they were to fulfil. Furthermore, certainly for John and possibly also for Jesus for a time, they were not fully certain which future eschatological figures to anticipate. Both John and Jesus are questioned by the Pharisees on separate occasions as to whether they are the Messiah, or as to what eschatological role they saw themselves fulfilling. In turn, John even questions Jesus, sending a delegation of his disciples after he has been thrown into prison, to clarify whether Jesus is the Messiah.

So, as we draw to a close, what message should we take home as to where we find ourselves currently? When we think of Jesus, and this is entirely natural, we tend to think of him as the post-Easter Jesus and even as the post-Ascension, omniscient, omnipotent Son of God. There's nothing wrong with this, except that it sometimes prevents us from first seeing and appreciating the humanity of Jesus, which I believe was the hallmark of his earthly ministry. While they were on earth, Jesus and John never had all the answers, nor did they claim to. Seemingly, in today's Gospel, John doesn't even know fully who he is, he simply says he is "a voice crying out in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord!'" Yet Jesus and John still had one thing in common, they were both faithful to the call of God.

Amen.