

Homily: Third Sunday of Advent 2020

I wonder if you can remember a time in your life when you saw someone you didn't know, but they made an immediate impression on you. It could have been someone who did something heroic or helped in some unexpected way; maybe they said something which was particularly helpful, insightful or funny; maybe it was simply a case of love at first sight! When we see a stranger who catches our attention, an obvious question comes to mind: "Who is that?" We want to know more, to find out their name, their origins, how they connect with the rest of the world.

That question is at the heart of today's Gospel. John the Baptist has made a real impression; people are attracted by him, they come to him and listen; he has even gathered around him a group of disciples. And so the leaders from Jerusalem, who have noticed him, send a delegation, and they ask: "Who are you?"

This is not just curiosity. There was a feeling of expectation in the air – the people were awaiting a saviour, the Messiah. Could this be him? Perhaps John's answer disappointed them: "I am not the Christ". So they dig further: is he prophet Elijah, returned as had been prophesied? "I am not", John tells them. Is he then the great prophet who was also expected? "No", comes the reply. This repeated denial, this "I am not" is important, because it contrasts so clearly with the words of Jesus. In the Gospel the Lord often says, "I am" ("I am the Good Shepherd"; "I am the Light of the World"; "I am the Bread of Life" etc.) and these words are significant because they echo the words of God Himself, when He appeared to Moses at the Burning Bush: "I am who I am." When Jesus says, "I am", He is making a claim: He is God in our midst. But John the Baptist says, "I am not" – He is not God, He is not the Saviour, He is not the Light of the World.

But John is a witness, as today's Gospel tells us very clearly. He is a witness to speak for the Light, Jesus; He points out the Saviour when He comes. And Jesus needs this witness, at this point in His story, because He is not yet known by the people. "There stands among you, unknown to you," John tells the crowd today, "the One who is coming after me." John is a witness who is called to make this unseen presence known to the world: he must announce the Lamb of God who comes to take away the sins of the world.

The Greek word for witness is the origin our word 'martyr', one who gives his or her life for the truth. To be a witness, as John knew very well, was not just an extra job tacked on to his life: it *was* his life. In the end, he died a martyr for Christ, beheaded by king Herod. But even before that, his whole life was one of witness to the Lord: leaping in his mother's womb when he sensed the closeness of the unborn Saviour; living a life of austerity and self-denial; going out into the wilderness to devote himself completely to his ministry. Everything was about witnessing to Jesus. That was his purpose. That was his life. Being a witness is all-encompassing.

And being a witness brought him joy. In his first witness to Jesus, he rejoiced, even though he was still unborn; and at the end of his work, he said this: "The bridegroom's friend is

glad when he hears the bridegroom's voice. This same joy I feel, and now it is complete. He must increase and I must decrease" (John 3:29-30). In giving of himself, in 'decreasing' so that Christ could come to the fore, John the Baptist found that his joy was made complete. Today, *Gaudete Sunday*, is a day when we're invited to be like John: to recognise the closeness of Jesus and to rejoice in how near the Lord is. Your days of leaping for joy may be over (or maybe not!) but the Lord wants your joy to be complete, and He comes to offer you this gift.

If we know that the Lord is close, if we find joy – real joy – in His presence, surely we too will want to share this: in other words, we will want to be witnesses to Jesus too. Not simply to tack onto our lives the odd word about Him, or occasional times when we let our faith show. But really to let our whole lives witness to Him – to allow every aspect of our lives to communicate the presence of Jesus, the reality of divine love, in our world. It may seem like a tall order – really, I suppose it is – but that's what we are invited to aim for, and not grudgingly, but with the joy that comes from knowing Jesus by our side.

Maybe today we could ask ourselves the same question put to John: "Who are you?" Who am I? Am I a witness to the presence of Christ in the world? Do I know myself to be a beloved disciple, a loved follower of Jesus? Do I experience myself as a loved sinner, someone who is flawed and yet adored by God? Who am I before Him? How does He look on me? How do I look upon myself?

If these seem like big questions, maybe that's because they are. In a sense, there's an even bigger, more important question, but fortunately for us, it's one which is answered in today's Gospel. The question is: "Who is Jesus?" Who is this Saviour whose birth, whose coming, we will soon celebrate? The answer is clear: He is the Light of the World, a light still in need of witnesses today. He is the One who stands among us, unknown to so many in our world, yet really and truly God in the midst of His people.

Fr Andrew

