

John 1:6-8, 19-28 Advent 3 2017
St Paul's Anglican Church Beaconsfield.

Have we ever been in a situation when we are meeting new people – perhaps at a party, or in the workplace, or at school or at a child care centre meeting other parents. We get talking to someone and sooner or later the question comes up, “what do you DO?”

If we are retired from work we might say, “I’m retired”.

If we are in a paid job, we will say what we do.. “Oh, I’m an Anglican Priest”... or “I am a pilot, or I am a writer, or I’m confused – I actually don’t know what I do”

If we aren’t in paid work we might say, “I work at home looking after my family” or “I’m unemployed”

As soon as we answer this question, “what do you do”? we have begun in some way to define ourselves and in some way to allow other people to define US. To categorise us...to locate us or apply a set of assumptions about who we are.

That’s Michael....the Priest.

That’s Jane...who is a pilot

That’s Sarah – who is a writer.

This kind of social exchange is perfectly normal and it gives us a starting point for conversation with other people...but of course it has a downside...once a label begins to stick to us it may have the effect of limiting relational possibilities. A whole bunch of assumptions and mental frameworks have been launched in the mind of the listener and those assumptions affect our relationships.

In other cultures there are different starting points. In aboriginal communities, the starting question is not ‘what do you do’, it’s ‘where do you come from’ or ‘who are your relatives’. Then the person can be socially located, for better and sometimes for worse.

I wonder what John the Baptist would have said at a party if someone said to him, “Hey John, what do YOU do?”

John may have said something like, “I hang out in the desert eating locusts and telling people to get their act together...I tell them that the end of the world is coming and that the axe is at the foot of the tree and that every tree that doesn’t bear good fruit will be cut down...and then I baptise those repentant sinners in the Jordan River”.

And then everything goes really quiet at the party and the listener says, ‘OK’, and slips away to get another drink. Pretty soon John get’s a label....Who was that guy? Oh, that’s John the Baptist. Crazy man. Religious nutter.

In John's Gospel (that's John the Evangelist, not John the Baptist), we find John the Baptist at great pains to reject any kind of definition being thrust upon him which would distract from the centrality of Christ.

When the Jewish authorities hear what John is doing out on the banks of the Jordan River, they send out some priests and Levites to try to get a handle on who this guy is. After all, if you can name something or someone then they are easier to get under control. This is why in the scriptures God refuses to give God's name to Moses. God simply says, "I am who I am" [Exodus 3:14].

So these priests and Levites try to pin a label on John.

"Who are you?"Answer, **"I am not the Christ"**

"Then are you Elijah?" (it was commonly expected that Elijah would return to announce the coming Messiah)...Answer... **"I am not"**.

"Are you the prophet" (in 2nd temple Judaism there were a range of messianic expectations, one of which was that the Messiah would be a prophet)..Answer... **"Nope"**.

When pressed on the question, John says of himself, "I am the one who points to the Christ". John is a highway maker – he's building a straight path to make it possible for people to return from exile. John is opening up a spiritual way for people (clear out the junk; turn around; pay attention to what God is doing here).

It seems to me that what John the Baptist is doing is that he is pointing towards the future. The people questioning John are trying to locate him in relation to the story of the people of God – to see how he fits into THEIR story and THEIR categories. But John won't do this. He's just keeps pointing to Jesus and saying that God is doing some spectacularly new here which is going to be way outside their expectations. Looking to the past is not going to be much use to them. In fact they are going to have to entirely re-read their past in the light of this new apocalypse – this great unveiling of 'things hidden since the foundation of the world'.

One of the problems when we read the Bible is that we try to read Jesus in light of the Old Testament and fit Jesus into those categories. So, for example, in Isaiah 61, which we heard this morning it says:

*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
2 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;*

But when Jesus quotes those verses in the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4)...when he says, 'today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing', he omits the verse from Isaiah which speaks of "the vengeance of God"...and then he goes on to give several illustrations of how God loves pagans just as much as faithful Jews. Even Jesus refuses to fit into the category of what everyone wants the prophet to be or say. As a result the people try to throw him off a cliff.

Rather than having our imaginations constrained by the categories of the old, Christ sheds light on the past so we can see the patterns and precursors of his passion (*). We need to read the Bible *backwards, from a resurrection future*. Christ is the interpretative key. Then we can see clearly what's going on....in Christ God is making God's character clear...as the utterly nonviolent one. God is bringing peace, not by taking God's vengeance out on us, but by absorbing OUR vengeance on each other and transforming it.

If anyone is IN Christ there is a new creation. We are all being re-created. What we DO – what job we have or don't have; whether we are a priest, a pilot or a writer, is not really anywhere near as important as what God is doing *in us by way of God's Spirit*– which is, day by day, turning us into something rather surprising, which is not bound by the expectations or others, or the categories of the past. We are being formed by Gods' eternally creative, peace-filled, future.

As to what that future might look like? That is the question which we incline towards this Christmas.

**in particular in the voice of the victim in the Psalms, Job, Jonah, the suffering servant passages of 2nd Isaiah*

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