

Sermon 13 December 2020 - Dorothy Peyton Jones

John 1:6-28 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

19 This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" 20 He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." [f] 21 And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." 22 Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" 23 He said,

"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,
'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said.

24 Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. 25 They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, [g] nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" 26 John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, 27 the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." 28 This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

I Thess 5:16-24 NRSV

¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not despise the words of prophets, [a] ²¹ but test everything; hold fast to what is good; ²² abstain from every form of evil.

²³ May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound [b] and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

Open our eyes Lord, we want to see Jesus,
Open our ears Lord, and help us to listen.

Another word for a prophet was a seer, a person who saw things so clearly they could advise the king about what decisions to make. In recent days, many of us will have gone outside in fog or mist. A fog prevents us from knowing what is really out there, and that can be very disorientating. If we are unlucky enough to combine mask-wearing and spectacle-wearing; personal fog has become a feature of most days! That deprivation really makes me prize visibility; **it is so great when you take off either the mask or the glasses and you can see again!**

A seer, like John the Baptist, helped to dispel fog and bring clarity to confusion.

John spoke the word of the Lord to the Jews. Their confusion required working out what it meant to be God's chosen people under Roman occupation; how to use their inheritance of the law and the prophets, how to live. John could see that the Saviour was coming soon, and so he urged people to change, in order to be ready. By going into the wilderness, and speaking by the river Jordan, John reminded people about historical, vivid encounters with God.

Seeing is often a metaphor for understanding. There are a lot of obstructions which stop us from seeing clearly.

There is a lot in life that we cannot understand. St Paul wrote to the Corinthians *Now we see through a glass darkly,*

then we shall see face to face. We long to know the truth about ourselves, each other and God; but only once this life is over will we see clearly. **Now it is like looking through the mist.**

I wonder if John were down by the Cam what he would think we need to see more clearly. If this was a longer sermon, I could talk about a vision for the church, the city, the nation and the world. You will be grateful to know I am confining myself to the individual. During Covid many people have felt disorientated, and anxious about who they are, about their safety, and even just about what to do. **I suggest John would tell us to clear away some fog, so we can see core truths about our identity, our grounds for confidence, and our calling.**

1, Identity.

The Jews were keen to know who John was. Who do we say we are? The disruption of everyday routine by Covid and Brexit can strip us of key signs of our identity; such as where we work, who we spend time with, or our freedom to choose where we go. It **is** confusing. If we think of our primary identity (Irving Goffman master status) as who we are in God's eyes; then that is not subject to change. We are created by God's power and redeemed by God's love. Before Nick offers us the sacrament, he will say, **remember Christ died for you.** That is who you are, someone dearly beloved, bought with a price. If we can hold firm to that ID, it gives us clarity in a fog of changing rules and guidance. Our identity as citizens of heaven cannot be taken away.

2. Safety.

What can we be sure of? Misinformation and rumours abound. Levels of trust in presidents, politicians, pastors and preachers are very low. Their fallibility should not be a surprise to us given our theology of sinful humanity. That bad news is why the coming of a Saviour is such good news. St Paul reminds us that our hope and trust lies in God, *'May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.'*

We rely on God's faithfulness, not ours.

Yet John was beheaded, Jesus was crucified, Paul was martyred, and our lovely Maureen (Ling)is no longer with us in the body. In this life, we do see sorrow and pain, which blurs our sight for a while. We are called to see beyond that, to the big picture. If we see there is no safer place to be than in the hands of God, then we can feel **inwardly very secure**, no matter what happens outwardly. (contd)

3. Calling

What are we supposed to do in this strange time? I think the answer is the same as for God's people in all places and at all times.

16 Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you..... hold fast to what is good; 22 abstain from every form of evil.

Covid or Brexit need not stop us from doing this.

I am going to end with a prayer.

Prayer of St Richard of Chichester

Thanks be to thee, my Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits thou hast given me,
for all the pains and insults thou hast borne for me.
O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,
may I know thee more clearly,
love thee more dearly,
and follow thee more nearly, day by day.
Amen.