

The Witness of John the Baptist by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 17th December 2017 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings Isaiah 40:1-11 John 1:6-8.19-28

Introduction: Helen Shapiro track *My soul is a witness*

My soul is a witness, yes it is, yes it is,
My soul is a witness, yes it is, yes it is,
of what God's love can do for you,
It will always see you through.
My soul is a witness, yes it is.

Have you ever been asked to be a witness of a road accident? Have you ever been called as a witness in court? Or maybe have you been asked to write someone a reference for a job application?

There's a great sense of responsibility in being a witness. What you say will make a difference. But you are not usually the only witness or referee. People will take notice of your testimony, but they will also consult others.

John the Baptist

On the third Sunday in Advent, as we consider those who prepared the way for Jesus, we consider John the Baptist. As we heard last week, Jesus referred to him as a prophet, in the tradition of the prophets of the Old Testament. Like the prophets of ancient times, John called people to repentance, and spoke out against vice in high places, especially the way Herod Antipas had taken his brother Philip's wife, Herodias. Criticising the powerful was to cost John his life.

But in the gospel of John, the focus is on John the Baptist as a witness to Jesus. When he is asked about himself, he is keen to affirm that he is not the Messiah, but in the words of Isaiah he is the one sent to prepare the way for him. He is not even worthy to untie the sandals of the one who is to come. In the 8 verses that follow today's passage, John bears witness to seeing the Holy Spirit descend on Jesus like a dove, and points his own disciples to Jesus with the words "Behold the Lamb of God". Later, in chapter 3, John refers to Jesus as the Bridegroom, and himself as simply the friend of the bridegroom. "He must increase", he says, "but I must decrease" (3:30).

The theme of bearing witness is an important one in John's Gospel. In chapter 1, Andrew listens to John's testimony and calls his brother Simon Peter to meet Jesus. Philip calls Nathaniel. In chapter 4, the woman at the well in Samaria goes and tells all her friends about Jesus, and they come to see him. Her testimony convinces many that Jesus is the Messiah, and others are convinced when they meet him themselves¹.

Later in the Gospel, Jesus claims that God the Father bears witness to him by the miraculous signs that Jesus is able to do. These, together with Jesus' own testimony about himself, are the evidence that people need to make up their minds whether or not he came from God, and whether he is the Son of God.

And finally, in the last few verses of the gospel, the writer refers to the disciple who has borne witness to everything that Jesus did and said, and has written it down:

This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true. (John 21:24).

There is a clear pattern: people see Jesus in action or hear what he says, come to believe in him and then give their testimony to others. Those who hear this testimony also come to believe in Jesus.

¹ John 4:39-42

And we shouldn't forget that there are also those in the gospel who aren't convinced, and who don't believe. Sharing testimony can lead to changed lives, but some people, for their own reasons, won't accept Jesus.

Bearing witness to Jesus

So what does this mean for us? Few of us would want to take the public role that John the Baptist took, and I'm quite sure none of us would want to end up suffering for our witness in the way John did.

But we should take comfort from one thing: John the Baptist saw his role as pointing people to Jesus. This was not all about John, and bearing witness as a Christian is not all about you. Bearing witness to Jesus is about first acknowledging the difference he has made in your life, and secondly about sharing this with others. People are always interested in experience, often much more than they are interested in ideas or arguments. Being willing to say something like, "I find prayer helps me to make sense of my life, and gives me strength for the difficult times" is not the same as "Bible bashing". People can take what you say or leave it. But if they haven't already discovered for themselves the difference Jesus can make, they are likely to be interested.

Being a witness can be as simple as inviting someone to come to an event or service, just as Andrew invited his brother Simon to "come and see". It is also as simple as letting others see you living out the Christian faith as best you can. You don't have to be perfect – in fact it's easier for people to relate to you if you're not. All you have to do is to live out your faith in daily life, being aware that people who know you are a Christian will be interested to see what your faith really means to you in practice.

This Christmas provides many opportunities to invite people to church. What could be more attractive than a carol service? Get a friend, family member or neighbour along to the Carol Service and the message about Jesus will be shared with them through the readings, carols and sermon. We run courses and groups to help people who would like to explore the Christian faith for themselves.

But often the most powerful influence on someone coming to faith for themselves is the example and witness of a person they know. That person could be you!

Questions for reflection

1. What difference does being a Christian make to me? Or, how might my priorities and the way I live be different if I wasn't a Christian?
2. What do the people I live or work with know about my faith? Do I try to keep it hidden in order not to stand out, or am I willing to let people know I am a Christian?
3. What difference have I made to others because of my faith? What difference could I make?
4. Write the names of 1 or 2 people you would like to know Jesus for themselves. Pray for them.

