

Sermon on Wednesday 14 December 2022

by Rev. Bill Church

(Readings: Malachi 3.1-4 & Luke 7.18-34)

John the Baptist

We light the third of the candles in the Advent wreath for John the Baptist.

In this Gospel reading, John asks for Jesus' assessment of himself and Jesus gives his assessment of John.

At the beginning of his Gospel, Luke tells of the intertwined birth stories of John and Jesus and of Jesus' baptism by John. As Jesus came up out of the Jordan, a voice from heaven said, "You are my son..." but it is not clear whether anyone except Jesus heard these words.

By chapter 7, Jesus' ministry is well under way and John sends messengers to ask: "Well, are you the Messiah?". As a rhetorical device, the question is repeated, showing that for Luke, this is an important issue.

Jesus' answer is to tell John's messengers to report what they had seen and heard.

And, in case his readers have not got the point, Luke just before had recounted healings and the raising from the dead of the son of the widow of Nain.

Jesus re-lists these works - the blind see, the lame walk, the dead are raised. He knows, and he knows his hearers know, that Isaiah gives these as signs of the Messiah.

So, the answer to the question, “Are you the one who is to come?” is: “Yes”.

What, then, does that make John? A prophet in his own right? A forerunner of a much greater figure? Both.

Jesus asks, “Did you come out to see a reed bending in the wind?” Did you come out to see someone who changed their stance to fit trends or pressures?

No, you didn’t and John didn’t.

“Did you come out to see someone clothed in fine raiment?” Someone who had taken Herod’s shilling to their worldly advantage?

No, you didn’t and, no, John hadn’t.

John was a great prophet and more than prophet, but still not to be ranked with the kingdom of heaven.

Then Jesus contrasts himself and John with a joke.

John is an ascetic teetotaller, so you say he is mad. I am convivial, so you say I am a drunkard. But that is more than a joke – it points to a difference in their style of ministry.

You had to go out down to the Jordan to see John; Jesus came to you in your village, Temple, synagogue or workplace.

John was uncompromising to the extent of seeming eccentric, condemnatory, maybe unacceptable in ordinary society.

Jesus was happy to mingle with poor and rich, with righteous and sinners, but without being swallowed by them.

How does, how should, our approach to ministry and evangelism follow Jesus or John? Or is there a place for both?