

Third Sunday in Advent, 13 December 2020 (John 1:6-8; 19-28). WHAT do you think you are doing?

I am hearing voices again. Not the sort that are likely to get me locked up, but voices crying out from the pages of the readings which we have here before us. The readings are not just noise or words on a page. They are there to leap out, to cry out to us.

I wonder what voices you hear? Are there messages which leap out at you from the text? They might be the exact words which are there, or they might be the words which swirl out of the context of the readings. Looking at the gospel reading for today (John 1:6-8; 19-28), hearing those words from and about and narrating the story of John the Baptist, what do you hear?

WHAT do you think you are doing?? Who told you that you are allowed to do that??

John's confrontation with those who challenge his authority speaks loud and clear in brash tones, harsh words, disturbingly thinly veiled violence.

WHAT do you think you are doing?? Who told you that you are allowed to do that?

I wonder if you can recall anyone saying things like that to you, and how it felt? Maybe they are echoes from childhood? Mother or Father finding you doing something they didn't think you should be doing! Or a teacher or some other significant figure in your life?

WHAT do you think you are doing?? Who told you that you are allowed to do that?

Those words can evoke a guilty cringe EVEN when we know that we are where we are supposed to be, doing what we are supposed to be doing. Echoes of reprimands and challenges like that can be debilitating memories which trigger fears of being caught out doing or saying what someone else may think we should not be doing.

John is pushed hard. Who ARE you? Why are you doing this? His opponents come from the upper controlling forces of Judaism. They come with a weight of learning and authority and their challenges are supposed to result in obedience. The religiously righteous try to undermine John the Baptist by undermining his confidence and undermining his authority in the minds and hearts of those who might hear him – sending out ripples to disturb and derail the impact of his words and actions. That happened to John often.

Jesus got the same response – 'Isn't this ONLY the carpenter's son?' (Matthew 13:55, John 6:42). The leaders of the land found ways of trying to undermine Jesus as well as John. It is an insidious and effective way of crippling someone to undermine their confidence in the authority with which they speak and act. It doesn't always work, though it can be so terribly unsettling.

John doesn't buy that though. He is made of sterner stuff. He responds with clarity and, for John, an almost surprising humility. He is confident about the authority which undergirds what he is doing, and he points beyond himself. He is not grandstanding or out for self aggrandisement. This is not his 5 minutes of fame on Oprah. John knows what he is there to do, who sent him and why.

The challenge to John touches us. Can you think of ways in which you are called to be and to speak to show God to those around you? Can you think of ways in which being here makes a difference to what you say and do outside these walls? John's response is important to note. John didn't get defensive. He was clear and humble and steadfast. And John realised that it didn't all depend on him yet his faithfulness was to do the part given to him with passion and dedication.

What challenging voices, interior and exterior, do you hear when you take up the deeply confronting invitation to evangelise? When you share the faith that is within you, when you invite others in your life to walk with God as you do, to share the journey are you empowered or debilitated by those voices which might ring in your ears with words like ‘WHAT do you think you are doing?? Who told you that you are allowed to do that?’

In case you think just because I have been ordained I might be speaking from a safe secure confidence I will admit that the thought of those challenging voices still terrify me at times. What will people say when I share my faith in Jesus with them? How will they respond?

When I was Rector of the parish of Kambalda-Norseman I had half the Nullarbor as part of my patch. On my first trip along the Eyre Highway to visit the stations and roadhouses I was imagining walking in and introducing myself and getting an almost scornful response ‘Yeah. So what do you want? Why are you here?’ Terrifying!! In fact the response was gracious and open and the encounters and faith conversations with strangers who became fleeting companions at that time in that place are still sustaining for me.

John had confidence. His confidence was not in himself but in the authority with which he had been called and sent. We know that. It was at the beginning of that passage. ‘There was a man, sent from God’. So when we read this, when we hear it, we know that John wasn’t standing up just by himself, for himself.

And so are we sent. At the end of Matthew (chapter 28), we hear Jesus say to the disciples: ‘go, make disciples of all nations’. That wasn’t just a bit of task setting for those 11 or however many were around. It was for all of us. That is part of why we are here. To share. Until we grasp that we will only have a loose hold on why we are here and why the church exists at all.

And if the words on our lips may seem too hard to speak at first then we start with who we are where we are, remembering St Francis’ wonderful encouragement – ‘speak the gospel, use words if you have to, but speak the gospel.’

Advent is not just a season of waiting. It is also a journey and steps on a journey which has already begun. Christmas didn’t start when Jesus was born, or even when Gabriel and Mary had their astonishing little chat. It didn’t even begin when the wheels fell off the chariot of the people of Israel and they began to look at life differently. The journey began a long long time earlier. At each age in each place where we find ourselves we are part of that stream of people who God invites to share the journey.

We are waiting though. We are waiting for the next steps. And we wont find them by standing still.

Like John, with humility and determination we CAN have confidence in God who sends us as men and women with authority. Like John, through us, God has words to speak and love to show to the world around us.

Amen.

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