



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

Sunday, December 13, 2020

Scripture Passages: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 & John 1:6-8, 19-28

+ In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I've been thinking – or maybe pondering or wondering – what the connection between John the Baptist and Gaudete Sunday – as the third Sunday in Advent is called (it comes from the Latin word for Rejoice! that begins the old Latin rite on this day.)

John the Forerunner as he is called in the eastern Christian tradition, pointed to Jesus, the Messiah as the source of all power, healing, and hope -- and as the person that made sense of his own existence.

And he'd had a lot of practice doing this pointing thing. John is an extraordinary character really. It seems that it was his birthright to recognize Jesus, to point to Jesus, to announce Jesus with his own life. That's a remarkable thing really.

I think we have a helpful example of witnessing in John the Baptist. I know we don't usually talk about him this way, but after sitting with the Gospel for a bit, this really struck me and it was confirmed by other scholars - and by the history of art as well.

At first, John wasn't entirely clear about who Jesus was. He was halting and maybe a bit reductionist. Which is kind of funny because literally since the womb he had been expecting Jesus – he was calibrated to point to this man. At one point, just to make sure, he even sends a message to Jesus – Are you in fact the one who is to come? But eventually he was satisfied that Jesus was the one. But exactly who did John think Jesus was?

The answer to this question is: the one foretold. Foretold by prophets like Isaiah who saw a time when the servant of God would come to redeem his people.

The vision of the servant's mission and the shape of God's kingdom is described by the prophet Isaiah in the fifth of his servant songs in our Old Testament reading. And in the Gospel of Luke Jesus very clearly identified the first two verses of this song as a prophecy regarding himself, the Messiah, when he read from the scroll in the synagogue and boldly began his public ministry with that announcement. There he claimed to be the Messiah and described the nature of his ministry at the same time.

So what was his mission? What did Isaiah say? Well it's amazingly pragmatic and grounded actually.

The servant of God was sent to bring good news to those who are oppressed. The servant is sent to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn"

The servant of God is sent to bind up – to hold together the hearts of those who have had their hearts broken. That's a beautiful and tender image.

The servant of God comes to subvert a world order that takes prisoners; a world order that cannot cope with difference and so tries to eradicate it.

The Lord comes to comfort the poor, to turn their mourning into rejoicing.

The servant is sent to do all this because the Lord loves justice; the Lord hates robbery and wrongdoing.

The poor and the robbed and the done over will receive restitution, justice and recompense in God's new world order.

The oppressed will be known as a people blessed by God.

The servant, because he is blessed by God – covered in blessing in fact - rejoices and tells the people that they will be similarly blessed.

So God's blessing comes primarily to the poor, the oppressed, the persecuted and the victims of injustice.

That's the content of the servant's (Jesus') ministry. Now we can do what has been done since these words were written down, we can spiritualize away their challenging and radical nature and talk about spiritual poverty and soften the impact of the whole prophecy. And although I do think that meaning is there, you know, I also think that the primary meaning is that Jesus came to comfort those in actual poverty. Actual injustice. Actual robbery. Actual oppression. I think we all know that. And for that reason, these words needle us, move us someplace.

But back to John the Baptist, as one scholar pointed out - in the fourth Gospel, John does not baptize Jesus. This is significant because, in fact, witnessing not baptizing - is the chief characteristic of John the Baptist in the Gospel writer's view. That's why there are all those wonderful medieval and Renaissance paintings of John pointing to Jesus, whether portrayed as a baby held by Elizabeth pointing to his younger cousin the infant Jesus in Mary's lap, or in the famous Grunewald painting of John pointing to Jesus on the cross with a finger probably twice as long as normal. John points, he calls attention to, he witnesses in word and deed to Jesus.

But also notice that in this particular passage, his witness has both a positive and negative aspect. Positively, the Gospel writer says that John came to testify to the light. Negatively, John makes clear that he himself is not the Messiah so that he can talk about the one who is coming after him. Again, he points, testifies, witnesses to Jesus.

But notice that John's testimony isn't actually wildly articulate. Negative confessions rarely are. About all he can say for a while is that he himself is not the Messiah. He's just not. And he's not Elijah, or the prophet, or anyone to whom his questioners should pay particular attention. He's just a voice crying out in the wilderness. But, he says, "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."

This idea is an important one - this idea of witnessing - of pointing to, of directing. It's a reminder of our own call - to point to Jesus because John the Witness is an example for all Christians. In word and deed he pointed to Jesus in a way that we still remember and from which we can take both instruction and encouragement.

Because I suspect that we're often not sure what we're capable of in terms of witnessing. And so like John, I think it's important that we don't have to eloquent, just honest. We don't need elaborate theological arguments - actually, we're probably better off without them! - but instead need just a willingness to share with someone we care about a bit of the impact our faith or experience of parish life or of Jesus has had on us. We are each called to be just so many John the Baptist's, pointing with our lives to the Christ. And our priorities are that of the servant's: to alleviate poverty, to stand for the oppressed, to comfort the afflicted, to witness to the light and love of God in the midst of darkness.

So maybe that's the connection between Rejoice Sunday and John the Forerunner? John had known literally from birth that Jesus' arrival when he showed up, would mean that the kingdom of God had been ushered in.

He was deeply wise and knew his role was important and he fulfilled it with the utmost commitment. But that role was to prepare and then step back and watch things change. Blessed is the one who can do that in humility and strength.

So maybe, just maybe the “rejoice” of this day – is about just that. Maybe the refreshment of this day lies in repentance, humility and the relief and freedom of serving the one who came to show us what God’s love looks and feels like and how it can profoundly change this world.

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.