

Sermon Archive 322

Sunday 13 December, 2020

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11

John 1: 6-8, 19-28

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



On the front page of the order of service, there's a question. "Who is that?" And the question is placed under a painting done by the Sixteenth Century Italian painter Caravaggio.

Caravaggio was a slightly sifty citizen of Rome, who was extremely good at painting, and who tended to use for his models mainly young, working-class men from down the road. He found them in the Roman market places, and painted them as he saw them. If you notice that they have pale chests and darker hands, it's just because they'd been wearing shirts while working in the field in the sun, so had sun-weathered hands and faces. Realism - from the neighbourhood - was something Caravaggio presented.

And so, I imagine, when first audiences first saw his paintings (like the one on our front page) they might have found the figures in the paintings looking eerily like people they might have seen around town. The figure painted there - could that be Gianni, from down the road? Elisabetta's son, who hangs out around the market-place, looking for company or work? Anyway, as slightly familiar people were presented through art as famous religious figures, there would often have been a sense of "do we know that person?" And if we do, where from? And is this something we want to confirm or deny? It's all a bit murky. You know, the market places . . .

In a slightly less murky "who knows whom in the neighbourhood" way, but an equally complicated theological "who is that in the scheme of the things of God" way, the officials from Jerusalem go out to look at someone who's appeared in the wilderness. Sixteen hundred years before Caravaggio painted, Pharisees, priests and Levites go out to check out someone whose presentation to the public is forming.

It *is* forming. People from all the Judean countryside have been going out (well, in the countryside what else is there to do?) More interestingly, all the city people are going out. What is it in him that's attracting them? He's baptizing, so it's something religious. But what kind of "religious", so far they don't know. Who is he? What's he doing? Do we know him? Do we confirm or deny?

Well, they arrive in his wilderness place, with a whole lot of questions - questions that come across to me, anyway, as being asked in a kind of nervous way. (Have some of them seen him before - why does he seem familiar? Is he some kind of threat? Rough places plane, twisted highways made straight.) Their first question to him is blunt: "who are you?"

His answer is "I'll tell you who I'm *not* . . . I'm not the Messiah".

Well even though he's only saying who he's not, the use of the word "Messiah" is helpful. He's setting his answer within a religious term, so the experts now know that he's talking their language - even if he's not answering their questions. Although they're no clearer about who he is, they know they can frame their next questions in a Messiah-shaped way.

And they're well equipped to do that - because they know how the Messiah is meant to work. According to their tradition, the Messiah is meant to be preceded by certain others. According to the textbook, the Messiah will come only after Elijah returns. Does this familiar person (where have we seen him before) seem like Elijah? Is there something in his manner, his function, his edgy capacity to irritate, that we've seen before - well, that our ancestors saw before? Are you, John, the new expression of Elijah?

Answering this big question with a small word, John simply says "no". Is he being clear, or infuriating? I think he's teasing them.

Either aware that they're being teased, or not aware, back to their textbook flowchart they go. If he's not Elijah, then maybe he's one of the other prophets. "Are you the prophet" they ask. With a triumphantly cruel mono-syllable, John answers "no".

Trying to work out what this nascent movement in the desert might be (that feels like God), they've brought all of their lenses to work, their pre-planned "how God is expected to work" models to work. They've looked at this odd social phenomenon, this "outside the city" spirit or movement, and tried to work it out. And to it, John has said nothing other than "no".

With no other suggestions provided by their religious flow-chart process, they take the risk of asking a more open question. They ask "who are you then? What do you say about yourself?"

Continuing to tease, he says he's just a voice. Crying in the wilderness, he's simply a voice. And this, **we** know, is echoing that old prophecy from Isaiah. Is that why he's familiar? Acting out an event, a script from an old book that once we read - not being a named character - but being instead a sound - a disembodied "calling out". If the familiarity isn't in his face recognition markers, or written plainly on his driver's license, or photographed clearly in his passport, is it in his speaking? In what he says? In how we hear him? In how he insists it's not actually about him at all. "Who am I? I'm just a voice."

This is not proving easy for those who are trying to pin him down to something they can put in a box and report back to others in the city. The strangely familiar things in their neighbourhood are no more mastered by their understanding. In fact . . .

In fact, what he tells them next is that there is someone else, in their community, even more significant, more religiously urgent, whom they haven't even noticed yet. "Among you", he says "stand one whom you do not know - and he is coming after me."

The Pharisees are troubled that something important is happening in John - that they're missing. And John is saying "you ain't seen nothing yet". There is, hidden in their daily life (in the markets, in the "do I know you", in the casting of a Godly character within the familiar stuff of human beings with browned faces and calloused hands) of someone to whom John is merely pointing. The Messiah is here, in your community, and as yet you've not been able to see him.

Indeed, he is among **us**. And **we** haven't as yet been able to see him.

-ooOoo-

In a parallel version of the story of the "One who is to come", we find ourselves in a synagogue in Nazareth. In his first public statement, his first naming of himself, a local man says "the spirit of the Lord God is upon me. I've been sent to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners. I've been called to proclaim favour and comfort to all who mourn, and to give a mantle of

praise instead of a fainting spirit." That part sounds familiar - read, as it is, from the old, old book. This speech of liberation is something not quite forgotten - we think we know who this is about. It's familiar. Unfamiliar, though, is the wee epilogue this reader adds. He adds to the old "I am" statement, the phrase "And now it begins". Who are you? Now it begins.

Some of the people listening are impressed; and others say "isn't this just Jesus, from down the road?" Too familiar. We've seen him in the market place. His face is brown; his hands are calloused. Who are you? You cannot be the presence of God.

Seeing God, as God comes to us in Christ, is often blurry and strange. We send our delegations out with our nervous questions, and sometimes we almost see, almost understand, almost find a way of putting a name to it. Often, though, still we're left with our question "who is that; why can't we see him?"

Maybe the key to seeing him is to read our world with an Advent sensitivity to how he revealed himself back then - revealing himself through deeds of bringing good news, of liberating the captives, of reviving the fainting spirit. Maybe if we go into the world, looking for acts of comforting, even when they're done by people of familiar sun-beaten faces and calloused hands - people we think we've already met, then maybe we will see him, and perceive something of the presence of God.

Among you, already, stands one whom you do not know. As we get on with baptizing and crying in the wilderness, he's already here.

-ooOoo-

O, here's a little postscript! On the front page of the order of service, there's a question. "Who is that?" Well, the Caravaggio painting from 1604, is called "John the Baptist in the wilderness". He looks a bit young to be John the Baptist, doesn't he? Or does he? Where have we seen him? Have we met him before? What's he saying to us? Does he make us nervous? And how ever will we cope with the One who is to come after him? Have we seen him already? Is he among us?

Our Advent cry: Amen, come Lord Jesus.

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