

2024 TALK, 28.1.24, JOHN 1:19-34 & 1 JOHN 5:5-12

'THE OTHER SIDE'

Can't help but laugh at this wonderful story in the first chapter of John's gospel. Another John - John the Baptist appears by the Jordan river. And he is baptising people, although in this account it is not immediately clear or obvious why he is doing this. There is absolutely no explanation of John's practise of baptism. What we see first, is John immediately getting subjected to '20 questions' from the religious authorities. Priests & Levites from Jerusalem turned up to check him out, and see what on earth was going on.

'Are you the Messiah?' they ask him. 'Are you Elijah?'. 'Are you the Prophet?'. And then the Pharisees follow this up with a more searching question: 'Well, if you are **not** the Messiah, Elijah or the Prophet, **why** are you baptising people?'. These guys don't seem ready to give John a chance.

But John doesn't appear at all flustered by all these questions. All this critical scrutiny. He is just very open about who he is & who he isn't. He is very clear. He is not the Messiah, or Elijah or the Prophet. He doesn't claim a great deal about himself, or about this baptism in water. He has a very simple explanation. God has called him to fulfil the words of the prophet Isaiah. He is to be a 'voice in the wilderness'. He is to call God's people to return to the LORD in repentance. Why? So they can be ready to welcome the One who is coming. The message that accompanies every baptism by John, is that God's Chosen One is on His way. More exciting: John claims Messiah is **already among them**.

Here's some good news for us, today. God's Chosen One is among us. Jesus is not just on his way. He is here, by the Spirit of God. As Jesus himself proclaimed during his ministry: 'The Kingdom of God is among you / within you'... There is more good news for us, but we will come to that in a minute.

This passage finishes with John the Baptist giving this momentous testimony. He saw God's Spirit rest & remain on one of those he baptised. The next day, when John sees this same guy again, he singles out this man in the crowd: 'Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'... Since the time of the Patriarchs, for centuries, nobody among God's people had heard such earth-shattering news. Nothing to compare with this – John declaring: 'God's Messiah, Saviour of the world **is now here!**'. WOW !

This is holy ground. Right there. Right here. This should be plenty enough for us to think about and dwell upon. But there is more for us to explore here. And there is one, apparently innocuous phrase, from this story which I want us to think about. It jumped out at me when I read this story again. We are told: 'John the Baptist was, at Bethany, ***on the other side of the Jordan***'.

Now, you might think – 'what is significant about that' ? Those of you who have visited the Holy Land and seen the Jordan River for yourselves will know that the Jordan is not a big river. In fact, the Jordan is not a great deal wider than the River Gade as it runs through Hemel. Deeper, yes, but not much wider. So, the Priests & Levites from Jerusalem, could easily interrogate John, safely from Israel's side of the river.

But the thing is, in order for anyone to have a more personal talk with John, they would have had to cross over, to the other side. Those wanting to get baptised, would have had to get wet & cross over, before they could ***then*** be baptised. Getting wet was their preparation for being baptised in God's name. But this is not just about 'washing before bathing'. It's about perspective.

Those interrogating John stood on the 'right side of the river'. They never set foot outside of the 'Holy Land'. In contrast, those who saw their need for God, were those who got wet. These saw God's Promised Land from a different perspective. They were able to hear the voice in the wilderness personally. But those who never left Israel could not hear the message personally.

This is where I remind you of what Boris shared with us last Sunday. He talked of the importance of us understanding where people outside of the church are at, right now. How, in order to build bridges & find common ground, we need to see things from the perspective of those who are outside. Combine this with the results of our snapshot congregational survey about Carey's priorities in 2024, and you arrive at a clear message. Carey needs to find heart-to-heart ways to reach out to our local community. To your colleague at work, to your neighbour, to your bus driver, to your postman or postwoman.

I believe God is calling us to form what we might call a 'community outreach team', to lead us in our thinking about sharing the good news this year. God is calling us to find effective ways to build bridges with those who need God around us. Perhaps you might like to consider joining this new team... ?

I believe this is one possible application for some of us, for all of us, from today's story. The challenge of some of us forming a community outreach team. The challenge for all of us to open our eyes & our hearts to think outside the box. To understand those who feel alienated from & apart from the church. And, like those who stepped into the Jordan, to launch out & take a step of faith, in the direction of God & 'God's voice in the wilderness'.

And there's more good news here, like I said. Often we feel ill-equipped to share our faith with those around us. But, if we begin by understanding ourselves more, we can begin to understand others better too. One of the questions directed at John the Baptist, is this one: '**What do you say about yourself?**' This is the question which unlocks John's message. The beginning (and end) of sharing the good news of Jesus, is sharing something from our own hearts, of our own experience. Sharing God's love for us & for all.

What **can** we say about ourselves? There is much each of us can share, about the goodness of God to us. But let's stay with this story for a moment (as well as the passage in 1 John 5, you heard earlier). One of the things we can't have missed from this story: John says this, not once but twice. And he uses exactly the same words: 'I myself do not know him'. Here's where each of us, who love Jesus, have an advantage on John the Baptist. Each of us know Jesus. We know his voice. We know Jesus as our Good Shepherd.

And here is good news, perhaps especially for some of you here ! If you have yet to make a personal commitment to follow Jesus, you can do this today. Nothing to stop you taking a step towards God. Yes, it is a step into the unknown. But I can reassure you. You won't regret taking this step towards Jesus. (I did it, over 40 years ago, and it's the best thing I ever did...). You can pray a simple prayer: 'LORD Jesus, forgive me, make me new, I want to follow you'. Simple, but profound. Talk to me, or another believer, after the service, if you prayed this prayer, or if you know that God is doing something in your life.

Whenever anyone comes to God like this, they too will know what it is to receive God's Holy Spirit. Like Jesus, we can know God's Spirit coming to rest on us & live within us. This is the only way it is possible for any of us to follow Jesus. With the help of God's Holy Spirit. More good news.

Three-fold good news: We can know Jesus. We can experience the gift of God's Holy Spirit. We can know that Jesus poured out his blood for us, on the cross.

(Read 1 John 5:7&8)... Do you want to overcome the world? I challenge you, I encourage you, if you want to overcome in this life: Believe in Jesus!