

SERMON PREACHED AT SJH ADVENT 3 YEAR B 17 DECEMBER 2017

We met the figure of John the Baptist in last Sunday's gospel reading: the opening verses from S. Mark. There John draws a contrast between himself and Jesus: "I have baptised you with water; but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit." The gift of the Holy Spirit brings about a new stage in God's plan to save the world.

Now, S. John the evangelist, the gospel writer from whom we heard a moment ago, would certainly agree with S. Mark about Jesus baptising with the Holy Spirit; in fact he says so a little later in chapter 1. But that isn't the first way he records John the Baptist as describing Jesus. If we look at v.26 of today's gospel we see a rather strange way of introducing Jesus. The Baptist says, "I baptise with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know,..."

We could take that as just a statement of fact, an incidental remark. But it may be more than that. The word 'know' is very significant in S. John's gospel. A few examples:

- Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father.
- Jesus tells the disciples, "If you know me, you will know my Father also."
- Jesus says that the world cannot receive the Spirit because it neither sees him nor knows him.
- Jesus describes eternal life as knowing God and the one he has sent, Jesus himself.

There are many other examples. In fact, the gospel could be described as the record of some people coming to know bit by bit who Jesus is, other people stubbornly refusing to consider his claims, and an in-between group, the crowd, who spend most of the time being confused. The first group want to know Jesus; they include people like Peter, Mary Magdalene and Thomas – remember how eventually he acknowledged Jesus as his Lord and his God. The second group do not want to know Jesus; they include Jesus' opponents who pop up regularly, figures in authority, Caiaphas the high priest, and Pilate the governor. The third group, the crowd just don't know; they tend to blow this way and that.

Here, at the beginning of the gospel, nobody knows who Jesus is, not even John the Baptist. Only later does he see the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus as a dove, and recognises that this is the Son of God. He shares this revelation with two of his followers, and they start to follow Jesus. The gospel drama begins to unfold.

The drama goes on today, in our lives. We are in a privileged position, in that we know what happens to Jesus. We have the gospel records, and the experience of the church through the ages which can help us know about Jesus. But to know him requires us to make a personal investment, an act of our wills.

Think about how we come to know another person. We spend time talking together, and that can tell us a great deal. We can also do things together: go for a walk, have a meal, listen to music, and so on. Joining in a common task, something outside the direct relationship, helps us discover more about the other person. It's the same with knowing our Lord. We can come to know him through prayer – not just asking for things, but spending time in his presence, listening and thinking. In today's New Testament reading, S. Paul tells us to pray without ceasing and give thanks in all circumstances. And we can come to know Jesus through doing things with him: following his will, offering a service or ministry which is possible for us. Very rarely will this be something we should do on our own. The New Testament understanding of ministry is that it is carried out with the knowledge, the support and maybe the participation of the whole body of Christ. S. Paul, for example, had companions on his journeys, and his letters often describe themselves as being from others as well as himself: Paul and Sosthenes, Paul and Timothy, and so on. As we work with others we discover the Christ within them, and in those to whom we minister, Christian or not. Thus we grow in knowledge of our Lord.

As in many aspects of Christian life, there is a balance between the individual and the community. Each of us is in Christ, an individual loved by him and redeemed by him. But we are also related to him as members of his family, the Church, and we relate to each other. We are a community called to rejoice together, as S. Paul commands at the beginning of today's NT reading. Today is *Gaudete* Sunday, 'Rejoice' Sunday. Rejoicing is an explicit theme of the Old and New Testament reading. We can rejoice by ourselves and when we are together. Above all we come together to rejoice in worship, in the eucharist. We talk about being nourished by word and sacrament. All too often church members think that happens by a sort of osmosis: just come to church, and something will sink in. We will really grow in knowing Christ when we bring all of our lives – our private prayer, our prayer with others, our acts of service – into the worship we offer. Everything is there: the challenge to examine our lives, the teaching of the church, the offering of the bread and wine of our lives, their transformation into the body and blood of Christ, our transformation into being his presence in the world. And through us, despite all our failings, the world can come to know its Lord and Saviour, whom previously it did not know.

, looking at our lives in the light of his life. We can open ourselves to his presence, above all in prayer. Prayer is much more than telling God what we'd like to happen. There is a place for that: the sort of thing we do in the intercessions at mass. But listening and thinking have a place in prayer as well. For most of us knowledge of Jesus will come gradually; we grow into Christ as we are nourished by word and sacrament, and as we give of ourselves in the countless opportunities for ministry available to every member of the church. Looking for Christ in our brothers and sisters will transform our relationships within the church, and enable those presently outside to see that the Lord has indeed come among us.

PRAYER, STUDY, SERVICE; INDIV & CORPORATE

There will be times and events when with hindsight we can say, as John the Baptist declared, "Yes, Lord, you were there though I did not know you."