

Advent 3 2019. Who are you?

Today, at St. Michael's and all Angels, my former colleague and Curate Revd Wendy Bradley will be installed as the new Vicar of Bilton and Sutton in Holderness. They are adjacent parishes in Hull.

Katherine and I sent her cards this week and on a postcard I wrote this. "Remember – you are the answer. You, as you are. It's you that God wants in that place.

Like all clergy and like all practising Christians we have a shared task...to point to Jesus Christ. No-one did it better than John the Baptist he is our role model. Well, he is and he isn't.

He is – in that he openly said "it's not about me but the one who comes after me". He testified to who Jesus was and declared "behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world".

He isn't – in that wearing robes made of camel skin, eating locusts and honey and never cutting your hair is very much a first century Nazarene kind of thing...that MIGHT be you being you but I somehow doubt it.

We have to be authentically ourselves whoever we are and that can be quite scary. Many of us can easily slip into a role that makes us feel comfortable. We hide behind a persona.

To illustrate this I think of Ronnie Barker and John Noakes (I'm showing my age). Ronnie Barker was a tremendous comedian and writer, but I don't think we ever saw the genuine Ronnie Barker we only ever saw the characters he played. Even in interviews, he played a version of himself. John Noakes, the Blue Peter presenter was the same. He was scared stiff of the role and only coped by acting the part of John Noakes that he invented for himself.

The comedian Peter Kay is the same. He is never comfortable being interviewed...so he makes it an act and plays the role.

There's nothing less authentic than a person acting the part of a Christian...being what they think a Christian should be. We need to lose all that and just be honestly ourselves. Now THAT makes us vulnerable and we don't like being vulnerable but if we can be gentle, accepting, honest and genuine...we really do grow as disciples because we are being ourselves in Christ.

Churches can slip into creating an unspoken, unwritten version of what being a Christian is like and the sort of Christian that is acceptable. We create a certain culture and we have to be wary of that. What we want is authentic disciples. You being you.

For clergy there can be a problem with being authentic and Jesus nails it when speaking of himself and John.

*John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.'* <sup>19</sup>*The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard. You just can't win*

You can't please all the people all the time. Revd Wendy will already have disappointed some people. There may have been those who wanted someone with a family and she is single with no children. There may have been those who wanted a male clergyperson. There will be those people annoyed that they have to share their Vicar between two churches...nothing she can do about that.

Ultimately, as Jesus says, wisdom is proved right by her deeds...in other words it is the outcome that will determine the judgment on a person, not their style or gender or anything else.

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Ultimately it comes down to – who are you and can you just be you in Christ as a disciple.

As role models go, and if we were in charge of the PR for John the Baptist we would airbrush out this scene from his CV.

At one time he was the number one popular preacher in the whole region. Crowds flocked to him. He had many disciples. He baptised and turned a generation back to God. He said odd things like “he must increase and I must decrease” but that only proves the point he was the number one genuine disciple.

And then he is arrested and thrown into prison and suddenly his certainties and outlook are very different. How awkward.

Have you known people who at one time were faithful, fervent worshippers? They belonged, they gave, they were as much a part of church as anyone could be. And now they are not.

It is very very easy to judge. It's far too simplistic to look for a single explanation so be warned. If John the Baptist can have doubts and uncertainties, so can anyone else. Who knows what it was, or what things there were to lead someone away from corporate faith. We pray for them to come home (and I could sing a snatch from Bring him home from Les Mis but won't as Terry is away). Keep on praying for those who for whatever reason are not here.

What John is asking is the same question many ask of Jesus. Who are you? John had a vision in his head of who the Messiah would be. He has preached on it! He prepared the way for the Messiah but perhaps Jesus wasn't doing what John thought the Messiah would do – after all he ends up in prison.

We can be the same. We have a view about who and what we want Jesus to be like. We have a view about what Jesus should fix or sort out. It can be disorientating when Jesus doesn't do what we want.

In answer to John's question, Jesus borrows imagery from Isaiah, and we had one of the poetic passages read.

The blind are made to see

The deaf can hear

The mute shout for joy

The lame dance.

The sick are healed.

Good news is preached to the poor.

But imagine you are John in prison hearing that? How do you feel? Well that's great for all of them but I am still stuck in here. Or was John able to recognise the birth of God's kingdom through the person of Jesus and recalibrate his understanding of Messiah.

The mark of a true disciple is one who is learning to follow Christ and goes on seeking when experience doesn't match our own preferred narrow vision. Jesus can heal, but sometimes doesn't. Jesus can intervene. But sometimes he doesn't. Prayers can be answered. Sometimes they are not. Learning to trust in the dark of not knowing is true discipleship.

And so is pointing the way to Jesus. It's all the more powerful when life isn't all answered prayers and everything peachy. To have a trust in Jesus when things are tough is a true witness.

Finally, the true disciple is you being you. Not hiding behind a role. Not acting a part. It's letting your life reflect his glory however incomplete life might be. Sometimes our witness feels like a tiny candle in a great dark. That is when it is brightest though.

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The German pastor theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote this.

Whoever I am – thou knowest O God, I am thine.

In prison John may well have had a crisis of identity. How can I fulfil my role in here?

But our role doesn't define us and nor does status. We are defined by a relationship. We are the children of God. The opening verse of a song called Salvation Song says this.

Loved before the dawn of time,  
Chosen by my Maker,  
Hidden in my Saviour,  
I am His and He is mine,  
Cherished for eternity.

Being His and Him being yours is enough.