

## Questions of Identity

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

*1 Thessalonians 5:16-24*

*John 1:6-8, 19-28*

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“I want to make it perfectly clear that I will not be a candidate, no, I won't be standing in these elections”. How many times did you hear that, as politicians jostled for position before the last election or leadership race. No, I am not going to stand. No, I have absolutely no intention of running. No, I have other priorities, other commitments at present. And then – surprise, surprise, suddenly there comes a press release, a statement, a speech saying that friends who know me well have finally persuaded me...pressure has been brought to bear...for the good of the electorate, the party and the nation...I now intend to run after all. And we say to each other, I told you so, you could see it coming all along!

That is perhaps a story we are well used to, but our Gospel today tells of someone who suddenly appears out of the woodwork, or out in the wop wops we might say, and gains a huge following, but then rather than seeking preferment and office, he steadfastly refuses to be pigeonholed into any of the boxes that those with the religious savvy in the land want to put him in.

John the Baptist is a bit like a Jack in the Box who keeps popping out of whatever box the authorities try to squash him down into. They're secretly hoping I think that they'll push him down so far that he'll go away and stop disturbing their equilibrium!

It's rather fascinating watching this game going on between the religious leaders and John the Baptist, as he deftly bypasses all their attempts to pin him down. Or perhaps it would be if it were just a game. But the gospel writer deliberately uses language which we might hear down the road at the High Court – John the Baptist *gave testimony*, he *confessed*, he did not *deny*...this is serious stuff going on here, and perhaps a hint to us at the beginning of the gospel that by the end there will be someone else put on trial before the authorities, there will be other court scenes as well, there will be prisons and executions.

But at this stage we need some background – what is going on at the time of John the Baptist, that means the religious authorities can pick out of the air the names 'Messiah', 'Elijah', 'the prophet' and bandy them around?

The gospel writer assumes we know a bit about some of the leadership figures that the Jews of the time were talking about, waiting for, longing for, hoping beyond hope that they would turn up to rescue them as they lived impatiently under Roman occupation, yet again captive, yet again oppressed.

Passages like Isaiah 61 were a bittersweet reminder to them of how God had in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE brought good news to the oppressed in releasing them from captivity in Babylon, bringing them back from exile along the straight way of the Lord, through the wilderness and across the Jordan back to Jerusalem. There they had seen God's faithfulness in the restoration of the ruined city, not to its former glory admittedly, but enough to bring them hope that God was still on their side, and faithful.

But now they were back under the domination of a foreign empire, this time the Romans – could God do it again, and who would God use to do it? There was of course the hope of the Messiah, the king mightily anointed with God's Spirit, hinted at in Isaiah 61. And yet John the Baptist is very clear – I am not the Messiah.

Then there was the enigmatic figure Elijah, the great prophet of old, who it seems did not die but was taken up in a chariot of fire to heaven. Malachi (4:5) had prophesied that Elijah would return before the great day of the Lord. So is this John the Baptist figure who dressed strangely in the style of the Old Testament prophets, is he Elijah resurrected? It's interesting that here John the Baptist says another clear 'No', whereas later Jesus will claim that John is indeed the Elijah who was to come (Mt 11:14, Mk 9:13).

"Are you the prophet?", they ask. Which prophet? we might say. Well the greatest of the Old Testament prophets, beyond even Elijah, was Moses, and God had promised that he would raise up a prophet like Moses to lead the people as Moses had done (Deut.18:15ff). And they were clearly in need of such a leader now.

But John the Baptist refuses all these titles. And then gives them one of his own – I am a voice, or rather I am *the* voice, the voice spoken of by Isaiah in the passage we heard last week, Isaiah 40: 3 "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord".

This is the same passage where Isaiah speaks of people being like grass, 'the grass withers, the flower fades but the **Word** of our God will stand forever' (40:6-8).

And although these verses don't form part of our Gospel reading today, we recall that John chapter 1 is all about John proclaiming that the Word of God is now the **Word made Flesh**.

Can you see now the connections John is making almost in a coded way? John the Baptist is not the Messiah, not Elijah, not the prophet, but he is the **Voice** which proclaims the **Word**. It makes me think of HMV, His Master's Voice, he is the voice who announces the master is coming, just as a faithful dog will bark to welcome his master home.

Or to change the image, we hear a lot of sirens through the day going up Bealey Ave. And John the Baptist is like the siren who clears the path for the rescue vehicle to get through – and Jesus is that rescue vehicle, the vehicle of our salvation.

I hope you can see that in John's Gospel at least, John the Baptist has the role of revealing the **identity** of Jesus. John teases his questioners, tantalisingly saying, 'I baptise with water, but among you stands one whom you do not know, one coming after me, I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal'. If you're having trouble sorting out who I am, wait and see who's coming next - and I'll give you a clue: I'm not even worthy of being his slave!

One thing that's interesting in John's Gospel is that John the Baptist doesn't seem to know Jesus himself, there's nothing said of them being cousins or having grown up together, as is hinted in Luke's gospel. Rather John says "I myself did not know him, but I came baptising with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel (1:31). John recognises Jesus when he baptises him, and the Spirit descends upon him, and John *then* testifies that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah (1:33,34). John witnesses to Jesus and gives testimony about who he is, John reveals Jesus' identity.

If we track through John's gospel, there are a number of people who bear witness to Jesus and give testimony about his **identity**.

Nicodemus, the Pharisee, comes to Jesus by night because he is afraid of being identified with Jesus, afraid of losing his status among the religious leaders (John 3). But by the end of the gospel, he is willing to witness to his belief in Jesus by his courageous action of care for Jesus' body. His is a testimony of faith and love.

The Samaritan woman of John 4 recognises Jesus' identity first as a **prophet** and then as **Messiah**. She is privileged to have Jesus reveal himself as such to her, and then goes on to bear witness to Jesus in her community. Many others come to faith in Jesus through her testimony, and as they meet him for themselves.

The blind beggar who receives his sight from Jesus in John 9 has no idea initially who Jesus is, apart from knowing his name, 'the man called Jesus' healed me. Gradually he comes to see that Jesus is a **prophet** from God, and when he meets Jesus again, he confesses his faith, Lord, I believe, and worships him. (John 9:11, 17, 38)

Even at the cross, John, the beloved disciple, bears witness: "He who saw this has *testified*, so that you also may believe. His *testimony* is true, and he knows that he tells the truth." (John 19:35)

John the Baptist, Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the blind beggar, John the evangelist – they all *bear witness* to Jesus, they point to Jesus, they *testify* to Jesus, they herald Jesus.

What is your *testimony* to Jesus this Christmas? As I wrote this, I could see in my mind a house I drive past lit up with Santa Claus, reindeer, wise men on camels, candles, flashing lights, all mixed up in one glorious shemozzle. And I thought perhaps that is what Christmas is like for many of us in our world, a glorious mixed up confusion.

Paul for once gives some very pithy advice to the Thessalonians, which if followed I think would give a good *testimony* to our faith in the Christ of Christmas: rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks, don't quench the Spirit, test everything, hold fast to the good, abstain from evil. Or as theologian Tom Wright has précised it: pray, dance and be holy, for tomorrow we live!<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> NT Wright, Twelve Months of Sundays: Reflections on Bible Readings Year B. SPCK: London, 2002, 7.