

Year B

John 1:6-8, 19-28

What would we do if we only had John's Gospel at this time of year? A Christmas nativity based on John's Gospel would only have one child, speaking one line in front of the curtain: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth".¹ There would be great savings in the costume and props department but we might be left feeling

¹ John 1:14

shortchanged. We do have a kind of alternative Advent pageant today with just one character with very little to say who manages to shake us awake to the significance of the season.

The lectionary reading begins in the middle of the Prologue to John's Gospel which established the place of Christ, the Word, in the cosmos. This curious little section about John the Baptist appears to interrupt the flow of the Prologue and so seems to be at best misplaced and at worse clunky and awkward. A bit like the season of Advent! We're so taken up with the Christmas

preparations that we struggle to identify with what appears to be awkward and maybe even sounds unnecessary to our ears. But that might just be a warning to us that we've got something wrong. We might even be a bit annoyed because we've got another dose of John the Baptist this morning. What were the lectionary compilers thinking about? John the Baptist, the patron saint of loneliness and sorrow, really clashes with the tinsel and jingle-bells. And he has to because the tinsel and the jingle-bells crowd have got it all wrong. The Prologue to John's

Gospel presents the gift of the incarnation within the wider glory of God himself.

My father worked for a clothing firm in Glasgow. He was responsible for buying thread which, of course, the business depended on. His work would bring him into contact with important suppliers like Coats and English Sewing to name but two. Thread companies were after business and so it was important that they kept their customers sweet with little enticements. One such example of this was my father's annual invite to the Open Golf Championship as a guest and I managed to attend a few Opens

with him as a teenager and it was always great fun. One year the weather wasn't very good and we arrived at the tented village and quickly made our way to the hospitality tent where we were welcomed and treated to lovely food. After a few minutes of conversation I could sense that something wasn't right. My father and a gentleman were chatting but it was a wee bit awkward. And then he asked my dad the question: "which company are you with?" The answer brought a confused look to the man's face and we both realised that we had found ourselves in the wrong tent and had to make

a hasty retreat. John the Baptist's appearance in the Prologue is like the person who finds himself in the wrong tent.

Do you know the folk song; "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine, let it shine, let it shine, let it shine"? I'm sure you do and it's perfect for our text today because it sums up very well the core of the message. It challenges us to consider who we are and then with respect to the answer to that question, to live in a particular way. Jesus came into the world. He is the actual embodiment of God. The incarnation reveals to us in actual form how God seeks to

reconcile the world, his creation, to himself. John the Baptist appeared as the herald, the one who would proclaim the truth of the incarnation. As he pointed to the light of Christ so he also was a light. The little light of John the Baptist was shining. The appearance of Jesus Christ, the incarnation, began the series of events which would lead to God's spirit taking up his home within Christ's followers. In that sense, the light of Christ becomes "this little light of mine". Jesus came that we might become all that God intends us to be. We are profoundly changed in our being through the

transformational presence of Jesus. As a result of that our relationships with others are changed forever, for “I’m going to let it shine”. There is no place in Christianity for a hidden witness. If a person has the light of Christ that light is going to shine out and fall upon all of that person’s relationships. The moment John the Baptist declared his purpose his little light shone upon all around him. Some were directed by it and others were exposed by it. That’s what light does.

Making decisions in the dark can lead to some regrettable consequences. Back in the days before electricity, a tightfisted old

farmer was taking his hired man to task for carrying a lighted lantern when he went to call on his best girl. "Why," he exclaimed, "when I went a-courtin' I never carried one of them things. I always went in the dark." "Yes," the hired man said wryly, "and look what you got!"

A telemarketer phoned a home one day, and a small voice whispered, "Hello?"

"Hello! What's your name?"

Still whispering, the voice said, "Jimmy."

"How old are you, Jimmy?"

"I'm four."

"Good, Is your mother home?"

"Yes, but she's busy."

"Okay, is your father home?"

"He's busy too."

"I see, who else is there?"

"The police."

"The police? May I speak with one of them?"

"They're busy."

"Any other grown-ups there?"

"The firemen."

"May I speak with a fireman, please?"

"They're all busy."

"Jimmy, all those people in your house, and I can't talk with any of them? What are they doing?"

"Looking for me," whispered Jimmy.²

"The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it, or has not overcome it."³ People will instinctively hide from the light like Jimmy, or they will gratefully use the beam of the light to help them follow the right path. We are called like John the Baptist to let that little light of mine shine, shine, shine.

From 1921 until his death in 1968 Karl Barth, the great Swiss theologian, kept by his desk a print of a painting by Matthias

² The Jokesmith, quoted in Bits & Pieces, April 1, 1993, pp. 3-4.

³ John 1:5

Grunewald. It depicted the crucified Christ in the centre with the figure of John the Baptist standing at the side pointing to Jesus. Barth wrote; “with his hand pointing in an almost impossible way”.⁴

That’s an intriguing comment. For Barth, the role of the Christian is as straightforward and as impossible as the role of John the Baptist: to point in an almost impossible way to Jesus. It’s hard, it’s very hard. How our witness, our pointing, is affected by the force of cultural distortion so that our finger is almost forced to move away from Christ to

⁴ Busch, Eberhard 1976 *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* London: SCM

whatever else is shunted into view. Next Sunday, the fourth Sunday of Advent, is Christmas Eve. We'll be sharing here with the people from St. Gerardine's High and we'll be singing Christmas Carols, and listening to readings from the Christmas story. We'll be part of an ever decreasing group of people in our country who are doing that. But the little light that shines within us must not be hidden away. We are to be, and we are to live, as witnesses to the light that shines in the darkness.