

SERMON FOR ADVENT 3 | 16.12.2018

As soon as I saw this image of John the Baptist, carved by Arnold Machin who was responsible for the picture of the Queen on many of our coins, I knew what I wanted to share with you this morning.

It is a picture of John the Baptist as a boy, aged perhaps ten or eleven. His mouth is slightly open – with that kind of hesitant uncertainty that comes when one doesn't quite know what to do or say. One shoulder is slightly higher than the other, a tell-tale sign of anxiety. And his hands are joined together in prayer and yet he gazes directly at us. His mind is not above; it is very clearly in the here and now. And the here and now is not very comfortable.

Well, that is how I read the carving, anyhow.

But perhaps that is because I know John the Baptist's story: the child born to parents who thought themselves too old to have a baby; an only child, the son of a priest.

The older cousin of Jesus – but only by a few months.

And whereas Jesus seemed always to attract people by the quality of his teaching and his natural bond with people, John made his mark in the wilderness, His was a clear voice with a clear message, yes, but both the content and the style were pretty unfashionable. He stood in the line of the squirm making prophets like Amos, Micah, Jeremiah – the ones who felt compelled to share their message of God's frustration with the Jewish nation who had turned their back on him.

For who can go on for very long, living or loving someone who is endlessly critical, endlessly needling? Who can take, for very long, someone who doesn't appear to fit in, the person who doesn't care what they look like or have the social graces about how to behave?

Or who doesn't quite have the confidence to smile in their oddness, or to be smooth and confident in the way they speak. And surely there is nothing worse than a critical person who, simultaneously, seems to be harbouring doubts about what they are doing or saying...

Even at the height of his powers, at the time when he had disciples of his own whom he could send to watch his more charismatic cousin, John sends them with this message: *are you the one – are you the Messiah - or are we to wait for another?*

Poor John, he feels passionately his vocation to call others to repentance, to be the voice of the one crying in the wilderness. And yet the mouth says it all: *or have I got this all wrong?*

And that ambivalence can be seen in Jesus' response to those same disciples of John's. St Matthew writes: *As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. Then what then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you." Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen who is greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he...*

'Great' but also 'the least' - all in the same sentence!

Yet here in this speech is also the clue to John's role as Jesus speaks for his Father: see, *I am sending my messenger.*

The fact is that it wasn't John's calling to be Jesus, to be the Messiah or even one of Jesus' closest confidantes. Thinking about it, one might have expected that the two cousins (Jesus and John) – in the same trade, so to speak - might have worked closely together? But that wasn't God's plan. John was always the outsider, the one, who would ultimately lose his life – not out in the light where the crowds would see him but cheaply, ignominiously, at night, in a dark prison cell and at the whim of a dancing girl's mother. A head on a plate as a grisly souvenir. Despite all that, there is no wistfulness in Jesus. He quickly describes John as a returning Elijah – a huge compliment – but then he moves on.

And as our Gospel tells us, there was – when John was at his best – no wistfulness in him either. *'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.*

Standing here in Church on Friday among some of the best known actors and producers of our day - Richard Curtiss as genial as ever, Emma Freud breaking all the rules about posting on social media, Hugh Grant shuffling into our pews, Rowan Atkinson wearing the white cope from our cupboard, Lily James smiling her way down our aisle and Sam Smith sitting down and singing 'Can't live without you' on the same steps that our Sunday School use for their end of Mass presentations - one might have felt a little jealous of them all.

Each in their own way have given enormous pleasure to millions and millions of people. Who hasn't sat down and watched *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Love Actually*, *Mama Mia 2* or *Mr Bean* and not been transported into a different world?

But five minutes in their company and one realizes that they are as prone to the uncertainties of life as everyone else. Cut through the bravado and there are a bunch of people wanting to be loved as much as anyone else – as Julia Roberts' famous line from *Notting Hill* has it: *I'm just a girl, standing in front of a boy, asking him to love her.*

The truth is that there are some people who seem to attract attention and fame more easily than others. Stacey Dooley didn't dance better than the other contestants in last night's *Strictly* final – but she is absolutely winsome, convincing and confident, and she got the popular vote. Had it been left to the judges it may well have been a different outcome.

John Newman, a rather shy and tortured Anglican priest based just outside Oxford, finally left the Church of England in 1845 and became not only a Roman Catholic cardinal but looks like being made a saint next year. His calling was not in close relationships or in founding universities (all of which he frequently messed up) but in the quality of his writing, deeply spiritual and prophetic.

And the lines that he wrote towards the end of his life are the ones I want to share with you today as we think about the crucial part John the Baptist played in the ministry of Jesus – even in his uncertainty:

God has created me to do him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which he has not committed to another. I have my mission. I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next. I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons.

He has not created me for naught. I shall do good: I shall do his work. I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place while not intending it - if I do but keep his commandments. Therefore I will trust him, whatever I am. I can never be thrown away.

For if I am in sickness, my sickness may serve him, in perplexity, my perplexity may serve him. If I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve him. He does nothing in vain. He knows what he is about.

He may take away my friends. He may throw me among strangers. He may make me feel desolate, make my spirits sink, hide my future from me. Still he knows what he is about...

In this, John Newman speaks for John the Baptist – for himself – and, as we focus on the theme of Advent Hope, I trust for us too.