

## Sunday 17 December 2017 – Advent 3

So in just over a week we will be celebrating Christmas. This should be such a joyous time for us. Many of us will wake up, sit in front of the Christmas tree, a cup of tea or coffee in the one hand, a hot cross bun, possibly a rusk in the other. Some of us will have the option of sleeping in a little bit later than usual, others, parents, grandparents, you might not be so lucky.

For me personally, there is nothing much better than seeing a child's face on Christmas morning. When I think of what excitement should look like, that is generally the face that I always picture. I have two younger siblings, and I can distinctly remember their faces when they were younger, opening their presents on Christmas morning. And what always amazed me was the fact that for them, it never really mattered what that gift was. For my brother, it could have been a set of small toy cars, a soccer ball, a bicycle. For my sister, it might have been paint, a doll, a puzzle even. For them, it was the sheer excitement of getting something that they enjoyed. And I believe that we all had the same basic emotions as children.

But I found that as we got older, that sense of excitement, that sense of sheer joy, no matter what we got, it starts to fade a bit. For some reason, people, as they grew up, started to place more emphasis on the monetary value of gifts. The more expensive the gifts became, the more excited we'd be, the less expensive they were, the less excited we'd be. It was no longer the loving thought of gift giving, but it was the love we placed on the most expensive gift we would get. This is what I call misplaced joy, it's misplaced excitement. This is about putting importance on all the wrong things but our passage this morning gives us a bit of an example to follow.

When we look at this wonderful passage from John's Gospel, there are a few things that we should always keep in mind. The first thing we need to draw our attention to is seen in verse 6. **There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John.** If you can recall the miraculous birth of John the Baptist, his mother, Elizabeth, was barren, she could not have children yet the Lord performed this incredible miracle. And it was not the only one. Remember that, because of Zechariah's

unbelief in what the Angel of the Lord told him, he was told that he would not be able to speak until the birth of John. And that is exactly what happened, amongst other things.

Now I would imagine that this was not your typical birth plan in the ancient world. I would also imagine that these are these types of stories that Elizabeth and Zechariah might have told John as a child. I mean who would not want to share such an amazing story right. So it is possible that John may have known just how special he was. But what was John's purpose? John was sent to testify about the light, that is, he was sent to testify about Jesus Christ so that all might believe in Him. And this brings us to our second important aspect seen in verses 19-21.

### **Read 19-21**

It is within these few verses that we get a glimpse of how John the Baptist testified about Jesus. There were priests and Levites who were sent to John to question him. We are told that John testified freely by making three very specific and interesting denials. And each denial distinguishes and distances the person of John from the person of Christ. Firstly, John denies being the Christ, that is, John denies being the Messiah. Secondly, John denies being Elijah. Because Elijah never died, it was expected that he would return in the end times. **Read Malachi 4:5.** But the person Elijah would not return however; Elijah would play a spiritual role in being a messianic forerunner. Jesus acknowledged that John indeed fulfilled this spiritual role, but John was not Elijah. Finally, John denies being the 'Prophet'. This was a reference to the messianic prophet that Moses described in the Book of Deuteronomy. This is also the title that would later be used to describe Jesus. But John was not that Prophet. And notice that, up until this point, John has not answered the original question, "**Who are you?**"

John's answer only really comes from verse 23 onwards, and he first answers in the words of the prophet Isaiah. **I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'make straight the way for the Lord'**. John is telling us that he is the one sent by God, he is the forerunner to the Messiah. John is the one who will witness about Christ, making sure that those who are there will know who that there is one more important than himself.

Yet this was still not a clear answer for the priests and the Levites. The issue they have is still on understanding who John was. They recognized that baptism was a ritual of cleansing but they could not understand why John was the one baptizing. From the passage we can assume that it wasn't simply any person who would be baptising people. It was possible that the ritual of baptising was 'reserved' almost, for someone who was qualified, someone like the Christ, Elijah, the Prophet or someone of similar importance. And so John then moves on to baptism. He acknowledges that he only baptises with water, but he then points to the fact that Jesus, the one that the Jews do not yet know, is among them, and that Jesus is greater than himself. This alludes to the fact that Jesus will baptise with the Holy Spirit.

Through all of this, the denials of John the Baptist are now complete and this all paves the way, it straightens the way, for the testimonies, for the witness about Jesus to begin. John does not attempt to focus on his own importance. He does not attempt to focus on his own value in the story of Jesus. By denying his own importance, he is testifying about the one who will come after him, one that is far greater and far more important.

So what is it that we will be witnessing to this festive season? Like John the Baptist, will be witnessing to the ultimate gift of Jesus Christ, or will our focus be on the monetary value of what is under the tree?