

### Advent 3: John the Baptist – not the messiah...

This Sunday we enter the third week of advent. As, I think, many of us will be aware, each Sunday in Advent traditionally has a different Biblical theme. On the first Sunday the theme is the patriarchs (and belatedly maybe the matriarchs, too): Abraham and Sarah, especially. In the second week we shift to the prophets, and you may recall Claire reminding us of prophetic voices, like the late Benjamin Zephaniah. Next week, the focus will be on Mary. But today, on the third Sunday of Advent, the traditional focus is John the Baptist.

I find the Biblical texts about John remind me of a scene from Monty Python's *Life of Brian*. If you've not seen the film, Brian is an accidental messiah who inadvertently draws a crowd of followers to himself and then repeatedly fails to shake off their adoration. The scene that sticks in my mind is of Brian opening the windows of his bedroom in the morning to find an adoring crowd waiting for him outside. He remonstrates with the crowd and is eventually joined by his mother (played by Terry Jones) who comes out with the immortal line about Brian: 'he's not the messiah, he's a very naughty boy'. The Pythons were, of course, trying to lampoon the way that religions encourage herd obedience and discourage independent thinking. (Although, the film was not to everyone's liking!)

'He's not the messiah, he's a very naughty boy'. Well, not the second part, but the traditions about John repeatedly fit with the first part: they show John fending off enquiries about his identity and show him pointing elsewhere. In our Gospel this morning, religious authorities from Jerusalem are shown coming to John and asking him who he is. 'I am not the Messiah', 'What then are you?' 'I am a voice crying out in the Wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord...'. And in the other Gospels, John contrasts himself with Jesus 'I have baptised you with water; but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.'

So, characteristic of John is this self-effacing redirection that medieval images of him commonly show him with a finger pointing away from himself – like this famous depiction from the Isenheim Altarpiece by Matthias Grunewald completed in 1516.

Don't look at me, look at him. I'm not the messiah.

The temptation to fall into the messiah trap is, I think, more common than we might think. Those involved in training people in counselling and in pastoral work often resort to using a tool from Transactional analysis called the 'Drama Triangle'.

The drama triangle depicts an unhealthy relationship. It starts with the client at the base of the triangle, who sees themselves, or is seen by others, as a powerless 'victim', someone who is felt to be unable to help themselves. Over against the 'victim', depicted on the right, is the 'persecutor'. The 'persecutor' is someone who is imagined to - or indeed does - have it in for the victim. The mirror image of the 'persecutor' is the saviour figure, labelled here as 'rescuer'. The rescuer is the person onto whom the 'victim' projects all their hopes, or the 'rescuer' is the person who thinks that they can – or have to – save the apparently powerless 'victim' by standing up against the evil 'persecutor'.

It's an intriguingly rich model, because it allows that these different roles can be ones we either put ourselves in, or find ourselves put in by others; and the model also allows that we can all occupy different roles for different people at different times of our lives.

Consider for a moment – have you every cast yourself or been cast as the powerless 'victim'? Perhaps you have felt yourself under irrational attack? Perhaps then you have sought a 'rescuer', or maybe someone has acted as if they can save you, maybe even without you wanting it? Or perhaps you have

felt the need to become someone's rescuer? Or, then again, maybe you have been cast as someone's 'persecutor', or perhaps you yourself have been the one who has made someone be your 'victim' in your unreasonable demands?

The Drama Triangle can be a helpful mirror, I think, for all of us to look into from time to time. For those in church leadership the temptation to act as, or be expected to act, as the rescuer or saviour figure is (of course) enormous. It feels good to rescue others, right up to the point when the penny drops, and the realisation dawns that in acting as a saviour, the victim has simply been made a dependent. And a curious thing can happen to saviours who fail: when one day someone who is occupying the victim's role feels let down by their rescuer, at that point the model flips over and the saviour becomes a betrayer: they can come to be seen as just another persecutor. With apologies to Dawn French, when this happens the once faultless vicar then becomes then becomes the bad priest.

I should add, too, that the roles of 'persecutor', 'rescuer' and 'victim' can also be taken by institutions and communities: think of the caricature of the evil persecuting church authorities, or of the do-gooding parish trying (and failing) to rescue their local community, or the apparently weak and powerless victim congregation.

It is very easy to get sucked into playing one or more of these roles, and I think there are times all of us do it, and do it to others.

Reflecting on the Drama Triangle invites us to notice when we might play the victim and look for unrealistic help from someone else as a way of us avoiding confronting difficult decisions; or when we might like to play the rescuer because we feel we ought to or think it is demanded of us or makes us feel powerful; or when our frustration or someone's fears of us makes us play into the role 'persecutor' (ever made what you think of as a helpful suggestion and someone responds to you ask if you'd attacked them?).

In transactional analysis the drama triangle is contrasted with the (rather naflly named) 'winners triangle'. The 'winners triangle' shows that the point of an intervention is to help all parties redefine their roles. The 'victim' is be helped to see themselves as someone who is temporarily vulnerable, encouraged to remember their own resources and to find and use their powers. The rescuer (here on the right) is to be helped to recast themselves as a coach or a carer – someone who nurtures but who is not there to solve others' problems; they are to become someone to accompany the vulnerable person as a solution is sought. And the 'persecutor' is to be recast as legitimately 'assertive', someone who correctly identifies problems that need dealing with, but does so in a spirit of charity and with the aim of an outcome that is good for all.

There is much food for thought here, I think, and whenever we find others or ourselves behaving irrationally and are confused as to what is happening, it can be helpful to come to these models and to use them as a guide to what might unwittingly be taking place, and how things can be transformed.

But how did we get here from John the Baptist? Well, remember that he refuses to play the rescuer or saviour: 'I am not the messiah'. Instead, I suppose, you could say, he plays the nurturing coach: 'if you feel alienated from God, out of kilter with God's ways on earth, let me help you make straight your way: here is a ritual of baptism, here is an opportunity for reflection and repentance, and here is some basic guidance on good conduct which can unblock your way so that you can encounter God again. But don't make me your saviour. This is about your business with God'.

I wonder, using Transactional analysis, if for John's audience the role of 'persecutor' is taken by who they fear God is, or perhaps what religious authorities say to them about God. But rather than giving

them a quick fix, John, refuses to play the role of a messianic ‘rescuer’ from their imagined ‘persecutor’. He discourages dependence on him and encourages them to discover a real relationship with God.

Of course, all that said, it would be natural for us to think that John’s pointing to Jesus means that we should look to Jesus to play the ‘rescuer’. After all, we commonly talk of Jesus as being a ‘saviour’. But here, I think, we need to exercise a little wisdom: is the *kind* of saviour that Jesus is, the same kind of rescuer figure as in the drama triangle? Well: does Jesus’ way of saving keep people feeling like dependent victims? Does his ‘rescuing’ maintain the illusion of persecuting powers? On both fronts, I think the answer is no.

Firstly, just think how often when Jesus heals someone he says ‘*your* faith has healed you’. He deflects the impulse to put himself on the rescuer pedestal, and instead commends the one healed as not powerless after all; on the contrary, instead of encouraging them to follow him, Jesus usually sends people away: the ‘victims’ are empowered not kept confined.

And second, how about Jesus’ treatment of ‘persecuting’ figures? Well, Jesus doesn’t just magically remove them. Instead, he challenges those who would control others’ lives (like the Pharisees) by asking them to be introspective and to avoid hypocrisy: ‘by all means be concerned about the law’, he tells the Pharisees – ‘but make sure this law touches the heart, your own included’. ‘Persecutors’ are transformed by Jesus, not magicked away.

And finally, thirdly, when it comes to the *type* of ‘rescuer’ Jesus is, think of the big picture of the Incarnation: Jesus is not the kind of rescuer who swoops in to save (like some Superman). We are, after all, about to celebrate the vulnerability of Jesus in his birth in precarious surroundings; and his final act of ‘rescuing’ is associated with embracing the vulnerability of the cross. And then, perhaps even more significantly, there is what happens after: Pentecost. The end destination of Jesus’ rescuing is the gift of his spirit – the opening out of his relationship with God to include us, so that we might also encounter his freeing and empowering experience of God’s love, not that we remain subservient dependents.

In a curious way, and despite the impression given when we talk of Jesus as ‘messiah’ and ‘saviour’, John’s pointing away from himself helpfully reminds us to resist the temptation to sanctify the drama triangle. The point isn’t to reinforce the roles of holy victims, all-powerful saviours, and evil persecutors; the point is for all of us to be freed of these unhelpful identities and so together to begin to enter into a new transformed community of God’s people. Amen.

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