

17th December 2017

Not me.

John 1:6-8, 19-28

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, 'I am not the Messiah.' And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the prophet?' He answered, 'No.' Then they said to him, 'Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?' He said, 'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord" ', as the prophet Isaiah said.

Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, 'Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?' John answered them, 'I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.' This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

In the amazing and startling book, *Impro*, Keith Johnstone offers an exercise to refresh and clarify your vision. Look around your environment. Every time your eyes light on something, say aloud what it is *not*. You can use any word except the thing itself. So if you're looking at a lamp, you might shout 'coaster' or 'chorus' or 'droplet'... or anything but lamp! As soon as you've said the word you move your eyes on to something else and do it again, using a different word. 'Onion!' 'Tuning fork!'. 'Grocery!'.

The benefit of this exercise is that it clears your vision. By giving the lamp a different name, you refuse it its real name. And by looking at it without its name, you see the thing itself more clearly. You can try it at home – it's not at all a difficult exercise. The only difficult bit is not feeling like a weirdo for long enough to allow it to do its work. Don't give up too soon, and maybe try more than once. You will see things more freshly, more vividly, and you'll see them as individual creations rather than just types of thing.

I wonder if this is what John the Baptist is up to?

‘Who are you?’ He confessed and did not deny it, but *confessed*, ‘I am not the Messiah.’

That’s not a confession! A confession is when you own up to what you are or what you did! The priests from Jerusalem know it’s not a confession too – they keep going:

And they asked him, ‘What then? Are you Elijah?’ He said, ‘I am not.’ ‘Are you the prophet?’ He answered, ‘No.’

This is the classic game of 20 questions, where I pretend to be someone and you have to work out who by asking me questions that I can only answer yes or no. I used to play with the kids and usually they picked the Beast of Bodmin Moor or someone equally abstruse and it would all be rather frustrating. I often felt like a Jerusalem priest. The kids were merciless- much crueller than John, who by this point is feeling a bit sorry for his questioners, so he gives them a clue:

He said,

‘I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,

“Make straight the way of the Lord” ’,

as the prophet Isaiah said.

Except in all seriousness, it’s not a clue. It’s just how John genuinely explaining things as best he can. In reality, he’s not playing a game at all. He is being scrupulously honest in the way that prophets are scrupulously honest. If that makes him annoying in the way that many prophets are also annoying, he doesn’t mean to be, but he also doesn’t care. He may not be *the* prophet, but he certainly is *a* prophet, and so he says it straight. A prophet is not someone who dares to try to speak the future, but someone who dares to try to speak the truth. John does the best he can to answer the question, but he *has* no role, no identity to give himself. He has spent these years in the wilderness learning how to be true to what God wants him to be. He’s cleared away the fixed ideas until there is nothing left except himself in his own, unique response to God’s call. God can call any of us, and when that happens, we might think or say that God has called us to be a policewoman or a lorry driver or even a priest, but in reality God’s call is not about professions but about us, and when you come closer to the call, you will find yourself running out of words.

So John appears to be unhelpful, perhaps, but John’s speech is the kind of speech you’d expect from a prophet because prophets tell the truth as best they can. Of course John’s truth is not the *complete* truth, because only God has the complete truth, and a prophet knows that better than anyone, and so sometimes they are very careful about what they say. John tells the truth as much

as he can from his own attention to God, something he has surely worked hard at, out here on the edge of the desert. He's impressed people with his iron discipline his fasting, his knowledge, and when someone who's suffered or been willing to suffer talks about God, talks about truth, talks about what they've seen, people are willing to listen. There is a chance that this person has been places – spiritually speaking - they haven't, that he will be able to shed light on some of the curious corners of our own life. So we're interested then when John chooses to answer this question with who he's not. He strips away the possibilities, and his truth is that he has no name for his role. In other gospels he's called John the Baptist; in this version, only John. Like many prophets he invites people to judge for themselves what they see. He is so keen for accurate sight, and so aware that his own sight is partial, that he doesn't want to put ideas in their heads, words in their mouths. He can tell them what he is not much more easily than he can tell them what he is. He wants them to learn to see for themselves. As they shout at him all the things that he is not, does their vision start to clear?

What can happen in scripture can happen in our lives too, and as Christians we should long for and look for that. Here's my story, perhaps you have one too.

About five years ago, in a fit of sociability that was quite something for me, I bought a ticket to the All Saints Burns night celebration. I actually feel a bit guilty, you know, that you don't see me at many of these things. I I love you all, as I think you know, and I'm very committed to this place, as I think you also know, but it's a surprising thing when I come out for an evening. I'm just not very sociable. I feel like a terrible disappointment to Clare and to Des and to Emily, but there you go. When they come out from the temple and ask 'are you a partygoer'. I confess and do not deny it: 'I am not a partygoer'. Anyway, on this occasion, something went wrong, and I bought a ticket to the Burns Night do, and tipped up in good time. In the welcome area was a homeless guy, but he wasn't going to get any further. The party was in the hall and he wasn't, and there was a little voice in my head telling me the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man – the one from Luke 16. So I sat next to him and we talked. It was plain he wasn't going to get in, and it was plain he happier and warmer where he was than he would be anywhere else. I think he could probably smell the whisky inside the hall, but he was also genuinely homeless. I sat there all night with him, listening to his uncertain speech, tinged with the odd ideas and questions that come with mental illness, and I never got into Burns night, and as a result you all think I'm *even* less sociable than I really am.

At the end of the night David dug out a sleeping bag and a pillow and I walked down the street with my new acquaintance. At High Tide I bought him an improbably large fish supper, and though he

was still talking, I really wanted to get him home so he could eat it before it got cold. He didn't seem to be in any hurry - looking back, I wonder if he only wanted the meal so that he would feel looked after. Home, for him, was the car park under Windsor House opposite the library. He only told me that when he really decided he could trust me. Homeless people are vulnerable and often don't let on where they sleep.

As we approached, he said, I know who you are, you're Jesus. I confessed, and did not deny it, 'I am not.' Then who are you? - he asked.

What answer I actually gave him is now gone. I don't think it was a scriptural one. But it was a John kind of moment. What would the right answer be? 'I am one who for just one evening can see a person in front of me where most days I would see something less. Someone who for one moment wasn't tripped up by the fear that if I helped you today I would have to help you forever. I am someone who didn't know what I was doing when I sat down to talk to you. Someone who just wonders what other lives are like.'

What I did that day for that man was irrelevant. Looking back I can only see myself as someone who entered his life for one night and then never touched him again. My work was irrelevant, but perhaps I might hope it was as irrelevant as John's work in this gospel story. John has come to point people elsewhere. **'He came as a witness to testify to the light, He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.'** Same here, on a good day. I won out because I'm so bloody unsociable that I spoke to a homeless man instead of piping in the haggis – or whatever people do on Burns night – I've still never found out – and in my shortcoming, I got to hear a broken man imagine Jesus was standing in front of him. The mere idea that someone might identify me with Jesus terrifies me, because what could I do in such circumstances except fall short of his example? So I told the truth... I am not Jesus. I don't suppose the homeless man even heard my answer. People see what they want to see. And what they want to see, in all kinds of situations, is goodness and truth. What they want to see, is Jesus. Somehow, Christians, when we open the door just a crack, an impossible amount of light pours through, and Jesus is exactly what they do see. In our weakness is his strength. We don't do our work expecting our own efforts to do any good, but ever so often they make other goodnesses possible. So feel free to testify that you are not Jesus, and then, free of any burden, any expectation, go ahead, and as much as you dare, engage with the world as you can.