

The Third Sunday of Advent

John 1: 6-8, 19-28

John the Baptist sees the Light- Michael Brown

'Jesus Christ is the object of all things, the centre towards which all things tend.'

(Blaise Pascal)

'There kythed a man, sent frae God, at his name wis John. He cam for a witness, tae beir witness tae the licht, at aa men might win tae faith throu him. He wisna the licht himsel; he cam tae beir witness tae the licht'. (John 1: 6-8, New Testament in Scots.)

If your knowledge of Oxford comes mostly from watching episodes of *Morse*, *Lewis*, or *Endeavour*, then, considering the amount of darkness visible in these programmes, you may be surprised to learn that the motto of the University is 'Dominus Illuminatio Mea', that is, 'The Lord is my Light'.

But of course there are many references to 'light' in Scripture - just over 300. And in the Gospel of John there are 16, more than in any other book of the New Testament, and in fact second only to the Book of Psalms for the most references in the Bible.

A full list of the religious meanings of 'light' would be quite long. In Advent we might think of light as the presence of God; more precisely, light as the presence of God coming into the world. But what kind of light? Would it be a harsh light which dazzles and confuses us? Would it be a gentle glow such as the light from a sanctuary lamp in a darkened church? Well 'christian' light could be both. People have been dazzled and confused by the light of Christ and have then recovered to see the world more clearly. People are comforted by the soft light found in a Lady Chapel.

And then there is a joyful light as mentioned in the well-known Hilarious Hymn.

‘Hail, gladdening Light, of his pure body poured
Who is the Immortal Father, heavenly, blest,
Holiest of Holies, Jesus Christ our Lord.’

(Φῶς ἱλαρόν, regarded as the earliest christian hymn, in the translation by John Keble)

Why Hilarious? Well the Greek title in English letters is Phōs (as in *photograph*) and Hilaron (as in hilarious in the sense of joyful). This isn't a harsh light which shows up our sins but a brightening happy light which warms our spirits and brings us joy.

This hymn dates back to the late 200's or early 300's. It was used at a ceremony known as the 'Lighting of the Lamps' which would nowadays be part of the evening service of Vespers in Orthodox churches in Greece or in Russia, or in many other countries.



This is an icon which might be displayed at a Service of Vespers but, of course, a computer image can't convey the impact of the original.

When we look at a portrait we will usually be asking ourselves, 'What do I think of this?' But when we look at an icon, the question to be asked is, 'What does this icon think of me? As the artists amongst you will know, that is because an icon is painted using the technique of 'reverse perspective'. The icon looks at us.

And in today's gospel reading, the writer presents John the Baptist from a reverse perspective.

Almost at the very beginning of the gospel we are told, 'Look away from him, he is not the light'. John himself is constantly saying, 'Not me, not me'.

It may seem strange to associate John the Baptist with anything joyful. That certainly isn't the picture we get of him from the first three gospels and so why doesn't John the gospel writer not mention any of this? Could it be that he didn't really know very much about the Baptist? Not at all, but nowhere in John's gospel is the John from the desert called 'the Baptist'. As with everything in his gospel, John wants to bring out the significance of the gospel story and not just tell the story itself. And where John the Baptist is concerned, he could hardly do this in a more dramatic way.

Almost at the beginning of the Prologue (the gospel reading we usually have on Christmas day), the man named John makes an appearance. This means that he gets the place of honour next to the Word, that is in effect, next to Jesus himself. Why should this be?

Now it is a truth universally acknowledged that a single bible scholar may have several different views as to who wrote the Gospel of John.

And it is also a truth not always acknowledged by some bible scholars that their opinions are often of little interest or encouragement to those of us who sit in the pews week by week wishing only to hear the Word of God in Holy Scripture and to receive the Sacraments.

However, sometimes a theory as to who wrote a book of the Bible can help to remove a puzzle such as why the picture of John the Baptist in John's Gospel is so different from that in the other Gospels.

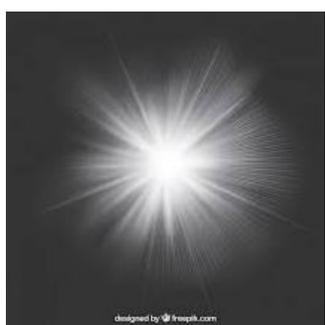
So here is a very brief sketch of the life of John the gospel writer:

Born in Jerusalem around 15 AD as a member of the priestly aristocracy. As a youth he was interested in the preaching of John the Baptist. He was then attracted to the preaching of Jesus and saw what happened to Jesus. Still young, he belonged to the earliest christian community. During the tense political situation in the 50's and 60's, he emigrated to Asia (in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire) where he founded his own school of disciples which flourished for about 35 years until his death.

This (quite traditional) sketch explains why John the writer gave such prominence to John the Baptist but then placed him in a setting where he was just a disciple, although perhaps *the* disciple. It also explains how he knew so much about the city of Jerusalem, not just its physical features but also the various ruling families, and why he was held in such great esteem in the early church.

Whether or not this picture is completely reliable, some things are true beyond any doubt. The writer of the Gospel of John was a literary and a spiritual genius who could both see and tell us of the light that came into his world.

THE ADVENT PARADOX	
Advent is a time of looking forward	We look forward to the light of Christ.
It is the light of Christ himself which enables us to look forward	

	<p>‘For His eye is on the sparrow And I know He cares for me.’ (Civilla Durfee Martin, Canadian- American hymn writer.)</p>	
---	---	--