

We have just heard two very powerful, dramatic and evocative passages of scripture; Last time I spoke our Old Testament reading also came from Isaiah, chapter 45, where I pointed out God's reassuring words from verse 2, 'I will go before you.' But in today's reading there is a direct command that rather contradicts this, 'make straight the way for the Lord'. It is quite a challenge, how do we do this, and it raises the question who is making way for who?

The life of John the Baptist has numerous parallels with that of Jesus. Like Christ he had a miraculous birth, a life dedicated to God's service and a violent death. But in our gospel reading, he puts great emphasis on the fundamental difference between them, making it very clear what he is not; he is not the light, he is not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor a prophet. He is a human being who, like us, is not worthy to untie Christ's sandals. What he is described as, twice in quick succession, is a witness; a witness to the light. And I think this gives us a starting point.

To be a good and authentic witness something needs to be experienced as fully and richly as possible. Worshipping here together we study His word, we listen and learn and encourage each other. In doing so our faith is nurtured and step by step, we come to know God's will, which equips us in our daily lives. Consider the imagery of our reading from Isaiah - valleys will be raised, mountains and hills made low, rough ground level and rugged places a plain; these are just some of the numerous metaphors in scripture for the challenges we will face; difficult experiences are often the ones from which we learn the most, and there is no better lesson than God's promise that He is with us throughout any trial. It brings to mind an encouraging lyric from the 19th century hymn, How can I Keep From Singing - 'Day by day, this pathway smooths, since first I learned to love it.'

But John's example does not end there; our gospel reading states that he is not just a witness, but a witness who is there to testify. The dictionary definition of testify provides useful guidance - 'to serve as evidence or proof that something exists'. In a courtroom, when an effective witness testifies, they often reveal a truth that is somehow obscured or hidden, and this sense of revelation is another important theme in both our readings; in Isaiah, 'the glory of the Lord will be revealed', and in our gospel reading John talks about 'the one among you, one you do not know.' All this points to the fact that, if we are to follow John's example, we also need to reveal, to testify, and not testify quietly, but to cry out.

This is no easy task. Declaring our faith effectively in this increasingly secular world, this spiritual wilderness if you like, takes courage. I was in London last week and there was a street preacher at Piccadilly circus, armed with a microphone and amplifier. Part of me admires his bravery, I am just not sure shouting at passers-by that they are going to burn in hell unless they repent immediately is the best way to testify to God's love.

And having been at my current job for a month or so a colleague asked one Friday afternoon what my plans were for the weekend. When my answer included church on Sunday he said, 'But you seem far too normal to be religious' – the slight against our faith was bad enough, but it was the insinuation that I was normal! How very dare he! We have since become good friends and when he sadly lost his father earlier this year, he made a point of telling me how comforting he found his meeting with the vicar who was going to conduct the

funeral...a mustard seed of faith perhaps?

There are many with a mustard seed of faith, sometimes referred to as the invisible church; people who believe to a degree, who pray very privately, who have been tempted to walk through those doors (and what beautiful doors they are) but can't quite bring themselves to do so. How can we testify to them?

From Genesis to our gospel reading today, and beyond, God is compared to Light; one of the defining aspects of light, is that it reflects. When I was a child we would always put our Christmas tree in the bay window at home. And it was one of the great Christmas moments, when we had decorated the tree, and it was dark outside, that we would turn all the lights off, except those on the tree. In that instant, through the myriad reflections, a few dozen bulbs, would become hundreds of lights. In the same way while we, like John, are not the light, that does not mean we cannot reflect it. It is often said that we learn best by example - The example Christ gives us is one of humble service; of someone who gave ultimately of himself for the sake of others.

We can give of ourselves in many ways. Reverend Jon has spoken of how a simple kindness, guided by the Holy Spirit, is as authentic an act of worship as singing a hymn or taking communion. We can give of ourselves personally - many people have stood here and given sermons that draw on their own very challenging experiences, they have admitted to vulnerability, to moments of weakness, and of course in admitting to weakness, they have given others great strength. It is not necessarily knowing the answer, but having the courage to ask the question. And we can give of ourselves together; donating to the food bank, the hardship fund, or the numerous charities that we support, the combined effect of which reaches far beyond these walls. Such acts of humble example, done in God's name, reveal that vital truth - that it is not our light, but the eternal love of God Almighty reflected in us.

When considering any course of action in God's name we will never go far wrong by relating it to what Christ declared as the two greatest commandments - to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbour as ourself. Submitting to His will, striving to know Him better, praying that what is crooked in us be made straight, becoming a faithful witness is, I think, one way of obeying the first; while testifying to His grace obeys the second, because there can be few better ways to love our neighbour than by sharing God's eternal truth. It can be our cry in the wilderness, not a cry of anguish but, in this time of advent, a cry of hope; a reflected light that guides others towards Him, and reveals that His is the way.

Amen.

