Advent 3 Dunfermline and Rosyth

What we learn from John the Baptist

I always enjoy the Sunday in Advent on which we meet John the Baptist. The world of faith seems sometimes full of people of all-surpassing niceness but who won’t tell you clearly what they think. John the Baptist is the antidote to all that. Noisy, intemperate, wild – he calls on people to repent and to prepare for the coming of the Saviour. And of course, as is often the case with people like this, he doesn’t come to the end of his days full of years and peacefully in his bed. He was a threat - so his life was prematurely ended.

But if that is all you see in John the Baptist, you miss some of the more subtle messages. John’s Gospel – possibly because of tension or competition between the disciples of Jesus and of John – shows John making very clear who he is not. He isn’t the Messiah nor Elijah nor the prophet. He points the way towards the greater one who comes after him – he points to Jesus. And so do we.

When I read this passage against the background of the things which I think about, it seems to me that there are three important messages.

Firstly John the Baptist is noisy – he is bold, public and confident. I know that as a church you try hard to connect with the community around you. Our Casting the Net movement encourages our churches to turn outwards in mission and in service. It is very easy for churches in our times to turn inwards, to talk only to themselves and to withdraw from the public arena. One of the big issues about a new Scotland in the future will be whether it makes space for faith – not just in guaranteeing freedom of religion which is a basic human right – but whether it allows faith to be part of public discourse and wider civic life. Part of the ministry I exercise as Primus is about this. I write in the press. I meet politicians and media people. I go places – I was the only visible representative of Scotland’s faith communities at the launch of the report of the Smith Commission. It’s public, visible and engaged – wanting to see faith communities making a contribution to the whole.

Secondly John the Baptist is confident – certain – about his faith. But thirdly he is humble about it as well.

We are greatly blessed at the moment in the number of people who are exploring a vocation – a calling – to ordained ministry and lay reader ministry in our church. At present in this diocese it is eleven. I am hugely encouraged by that because it tells me that, whatever else goes wrong – and plenty goes very wrong indeed – there are some things which are going right. If in our congregations, there is a quality of faith and community which allows people to be open to God’s call, that is very positive.

I often find myself in dialogue about what this calling means – how we nurture and shape it – what kind of people we would like to see in our ministry in the future. Last week, I wrote to somebody that I thought we needed deep conviction with provisionality – I might have said humility. We need people who have in their hearts and in their guts a conviction about the life of God and his call on their lives which is beyond reason – deeper than reason. Unless it has that depth, they will be destroyed by all the challenges which come. But unless they have humility – and sometimes provisionality – they won’t be able to connect with people in congregations and in the wider community who are tentatively making a journey towards faith. People pick up the certainty but they want openness with it.

So this is an important day for the mission of the church. It tells us about the kind of church and the kind of people that we need to become if we are to be effective witnesses in a society which is often less than hospitable to faith.