

'I am not the Messiah'.

A sermon prepared by Revd Canon Dr Simon Jones for the Third Sunday of Advent preached in St Peter's Wolvercote 13 December 2020

Refs: Isaiah 61. 1-4, 8-11; 1 Thessalonians 5. 16-24; John 1 6-8,19-28

Type the words 'not the Messiah' into Google, and first thing to come up is not a reference to John the Baptist but to Monty Python's comic oratorio, *The Life of Brian*. Or, more precisely, one of Brian's mother's most famous lines: 'He's not the Messiah. He's a very naughty boy'.

And, of course, she's right: this Brian is not the Messiah. His mother, Mandy, impregnated by a Roman soldier, gives birth to Brian, who becomes a reluctant revolutionary in the People's Front of Judea, falls in love with Judith, gets mistaken for the Messiah, is arrested, and then sentenced to be crucified. He's not the Messiah. That's the whole point. He just keeps getting mistaken for him.

Famously, and most unfortunately, when the colourful and charismatic Bishop of Southwark, Mervyn Stockwood, watched one of the first screenings of the film, this point alluded him. Arriving fifteen minutes after the film had started, he considered it to be blasphemous, and said so later on a BBC chat show, concluding his remarks by telling John Cleese and Michael Palin that they would 'get [their] thirty pieces of silver!'

Bishop Stockwood's misunderstanding was not only shockingly embarrassing but also deeply ironic because the message, that the religious establishment often loses sight of who Jesus is and what he stands for, runs through the film from start to finish.

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Trying to prevent the religious establishment of his own day from making a similar mistake, in this morning's Gospel John the Baptist refers them back to an earlier point in the history of Israel. John is not the Messiah but, as foretold by the prophets, he has come to prepare the way for him.

Preparation, patient preparation, is a key theme in this season of Advent, in which the Old Testament readings are deliberately chosen to ensure that we don't miss the beginning of the story: the story of God's people in waiting, of Israel preparing for her promised Messiah: the story into which Jesus is born.

It is a story of promises, of promises that will be fulfilled because God is faithful: promises of justice and joy that are echoed in Mary's canticle of praise, the Magnificat. The Advent Epistle and Gospel readings complete the biblical story: telling of preparations for the birth of Jesus; and, not least, of the post-resurrection Church preparing for his return.

For me it's significant that Jesus isn't even named in today's Gospel; nevertheless he is there: the true light, which enlightens everyone, promised in the Prologue to St John's Gospel; the one who is coming after John the Baptist, and for whom John, through the baptism of repentance, is clearing a straight path.

And yet John is fully aware that the delegation from Jerusalem won't get the message. 'Among you stands one whom you do not know.' That was the tragedy of the situation. The religious establishment did not know Jesus, did not recognise him as the Messiah. They trusted in God's promises, but were not expecting the light of the world to shine in the wilderness of imperfect human lives – one with us, one of us.

Despite God's promise to bring good news to the oppressed and liberty to captives, the religious elite continued to oppress and imprison people: with rules and regulations that skewed the image of a God of love who longed to shepherd his people into the expansive pastures he had prepared for them.

Their mistake, which is also so often our mistake, is to close our eyes to the possibility that, in Christ, God meets us where we are – in the messy reality of our far from perfect lives. As Christians, we most often do that because we fail to believe that we, like Jesus, are also God's anointed ones.

Believing that Jesus is the Messiah is one thing – most of us are, for most of the time, comfortable with that. Much harder is to believe, and to live as though we believe, that the same is true for us and for our neighbour. But that's the truth that beats at the heart of Christmas.

In the child of Bethlehem God has shared our life – shared our life in order to change us, to enable us to discover our true identity in him. Our response to that transformation begins in the water of baptism, when through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, the Father proclaims that we are his anointed ones, his Christs, his Messiahs, those who are called to share in the divine vocation of our brother, Jesus the Christ, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

There's a wonderful line about the significance of the anointing in baptism in one of the hymns of the great fourth century deacon and theologian, St Ephrem the Syrian. Ephrem writes: 'From whatever angle I look at the oil, Christ looks out at me from it'.

That's such a radical statement. How different would our lives be, how different would our church be, how different would our world be if we truly believed that when we look at one another and ourselves we see the face of Jesus?

At the current time, we're all too aware that the need to wear masks for reasons of public health means that our faces are often obscured; but even outside Coronatide, the temptation is always to put masks on ourselves and others, and thereby to obscure the divine image within each of us.

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Yes, that's true – but only up to a point. The Christmas festival we're about to celebrate proclaims that God longs for us to discover our true identity as his messiahs, his anointed ones. Unlike Bishop Stockwood, we didn't miss the beginning of the film. As Christians we believe that all people are made in the image and likeness of God. We also believe that, since the word has become flesh, there is no person, no situation, no deed or desire that falls outside Christ's loving, redeeming, transforming embrace.

Returning to poor old Brian, his life is a catalogue of misunderstandings. And, indeed, in the one occasion in the film when Jesus actually appears, preaching the Sermon on the Mount, the crowd don't quite catch what he's saying, turning 'Blessed are the peacemakers' into 'Blessed are the cheesemakers'.

This morning, at this Eucharist, let there be no confusion. May we who are invited to come face to face with Jesus the Messiah in the fragile vulnerability of a tiny piece of bread; and, just for a moment, remove our masks in order to eat what is offered to us; may we rejoice in a wonderful paradox. For though, like Brian, we are not the Messiah whose way John the Baptist prepared, nevertheless, despite our naughtiness, in Jesus, messiah is precisely the vocation of every one of us, anointed by the Spirit to bring to others the life-changing good news that 'from whatever angle I look at the oil, Christ looks out at me from it'.

'I am not the Messiah'. Oh yes you are. And so are we.