

Third Sunday of Advent

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By Pat Bennett

Introduction

An overall introduction to the Advent 2020 readings

One of our general principles in producing the weekly reflections for the Spirituality of Conflict project has been to avoid tying these too tightly to events current at the time of writing. Earlier this year however [the introduction to our Holy Week reflections](#) noted that in the light of the Covid19 pandemic it seemed wrong *'to blithely write as though this were a Holy Week 'like any other'; and indeed now, more than ever, we need the wisdom embedded in the multi-levelled and richly textured narratives of the Gospels to challenge, comfort and guide us.'*

That seems to be even more true of this Advent as we face renewed waves of infection with further lockdowns and restrictions, huge political upheavals around the world, and multiple uncertainties about what the next weeks and months will bring for us all. Never has the question "what is left of the night?" – asked of the watchman in Isaiah 21 – seemed more pressing; never has the ambiguous reply of "Morning is coming, but also the night" seemed more resonant.

Advent, the season of waiting, is also a time of watching – of looking and attending – and the Advent readings for Year B all tell us something about aspects of this very human activity. The questions they point us toward and which weave back and forth through the texts – *How* do we look? *Where* are we looking? *What or who* are we looking for? *Why* are we looking? *What do we do with our seeing?* – are all pertinent ones for this time when so much is going on, as well as for us to consider in the context of developing a spirituality of conflict. Looking for God, for the signs of their Kingdom, is an essential element of an Incarnational spirituality and praxis.

Thus whilst not referring directly to the pandemic or other current events, these reflections are nevertheless influenced by them. Our hope is that, alongside our ongoing project of exploring conflict generally, they might also support reflection on the particular conflicts which the events of 2020 have exposed or heightened, as well as on our own responses and what we might need to amend, celebrate or strengthen in these. This too seems a very appropriate way of keeping Advent – of watching and waiting and encountering God's light in unexpected places and in ways which are sometimes comforting, sometimes challenging but always illuminating.

Introduction to Advent 3: What are we looking for?

This week we are once again in the company of the Baptist – although now we are

seeing him through the somewhat different lens which John's Gospel provides: where Mark gives us 'the Baptist', this account presents us with 'the witness'. This different emphasis means that John supplies some completely different elements to his namesake's story and these lead to the third of our Advent 'watching' questions – that of '**What?**' What are we looking for? What expectations do we bring to our looking and how do these influence what we may or may not see?

Preparation

Either

Find a copy of 'The Sermon of Saint John the Baptist' by Pieter Bruegel the Elder (Google Arts and Culture [has one](#) where you can zoom in on the details). Spend some time with it, paying particular attention to what and who people are looking at and jot down any observations. Do these tie in with what you know about the story of the Baptist? Why or why not?

or

Get someone to play the 'who am I?' game with you (you'll find instructions on line if you're not familiar with it) trying different strategies for what questions you ask and in what order. What sort of questions or sequences get you to the answer most quickly? Why do you think these are successful? If you don't have an accomplice, think about different questions you could ask and devise a sequence you think will get you to the answer efficiently. How did you decide on your filters?

Text

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.

Comment

(in what follows, ‘John’ will always refer to the Gospel writer and ‘the Baptist’ to the figure at the centre of his narrative).

During Advent we have been using the gospel texts to help us reflect on our practice of looking. Previously we have considered the questions of ‘How?’ and ‘Where?’ Today’s story of the Baptist and those who go to see him invites us to add ‘What?’ to the list: *What are we looking for* – and to what extent does this facet of a complex process affect what we actually can or do see?

The first section of the reading comes from John’s prologue – that sweeping poetic introduction to the purpose of his Gospel; the second is from the opening narrative through which he begins to advance this aim. Both of them set out the Baptist’s identity and role – the first establishing him in cosmic terms as the divinely commissioned herald of and witness to ‘the Light’; the second by underlining who and what he *is not*. Through the repeated depreciations which punctuate the passage (vv. 8, 20, 21, 27 – and later also vv30, 31, 33 and 5:30) it is made absolutely clear that, whatever the Baptist’s pre-eminence in *human* terms (physically the elder; by parentage a member of the priestly order; already a public figure with disciples and commanding the crowds etc.), he is absolutely and always subordinate to Jesus in terms of the larger narrative. John thus leaves his readers in no doubt that the Baptist, although an important person in his unfolding revelation, and hence worthy of attention, is not the one to whom, ultimately, people should be looking. This is not to say that those who flocked to see him were wrong to do so, but rather that he is not the one on whom their attention should stay. Instead he is a signpost to direct their looking ‘further on and further up’. But to what extent is this what actually happens?

Neither John nor the other Gospel writers spell out precisely what prompted people to flock for baptism at this particular moment in time, nor whether they then went on to hear or follow Jesus as a consequence. However there are clear indications that some at least of the Baptist’s closer disciples continued with him rather than transferring their allegiance to Jesus (Luke 7:18); and there may also have been some confusion and even rivalry between them and those who did so (Matthew 9:14; Mark 2:18; Luke 5:33). Moreover the Baptist’s teachings clearly survived his death and continued to be passed on by his disciples, spreading far beyond his original desert location (Act 19: 1–7). For some therefore it appears that the figure of the Baptist remained the object/end point of their looking.

Today's passage however focuses not on the masses but on the priests and Levites who come 'from Jerusalem' to look over this strange preacher to whom they were flocking. We can only surmise as to what particular things drove these emissaries of orthodoxy and others like them out into the desert to probe his identity and attempt to categorise him – though here at least it seems to have been connected to ideas about the Messiah. However we are told neither what they were expecting to find nor what they actually made of the Baptist and his enigmatic answers. Whilst we can infer from other passages that prominent figures among the Sanhedrin *did* (both covertly and openly) become disciples of Jesus, the general tenor of John's Gospel (though here we must also bear in mind some of his other agendas too) suggests that for the most part this was certainly not the case. Indeed rejection, opposition and plots against Jesus' life were far more typical responses from the religious elite and power brokers. They were it seems, totally unable to see, understand, or accept that to which the Baptist was pointing

Of course there can be many reasons why we sometimes don't look further when we need to, or why we can't make sense of what we do see. However one possibility which the Gospel writers consistently highlight is the way our expectations or favoured narratives shape the lenses through which we look: sometimes what we expect or want to see dictates what we can or can't see. Moreover we are often largely blind to these influences, taking as 'givens' of the world things which are in reality only our particular interpretations of it. This factor is something which is central to the way Mark – our guide for this year – unfolds his revelation of Jesus. Indeed a classic example sits at the central point of his Gospel when Peter follows up his acclamation of Jesus as *Christos* – the Messiah – with words and actions shaped by a particular understanding of this which is totally at odds with what Jesus is actually telling them about himself. It's even possible that the Baptist too may, in some respects at least, have fallen into this error in his expectations of and preaching about "the one who [was] coming after [him]". Contrast for example the different ways in which he and Jesus describe the coming reign of God and the answers Jesus sends back to his questions from prison.

Once again then our Gospel passage gives us another lens through which to scrutinise our practice of looking – both as this pertains to situations of conflict and more generally: to what extent is our looking and understanding helped or hindered by the hopes, expectations, or world views which (knowingly or unknowingly) we bring to it? Some possible questions for exploring this are suggested below. As before these are not intended as rods for the back, but as ways to help us become more aware of what influences the way we look and what we see, and to reflect on whether this is something we need to be more conscious of.

Response

You might like to consider one or more of the following questions with respect to a specific conflict situation in which you are involved, to things which are currently happening in public life which you find concerning or challenging, or more generally to your 2020 Advent preparations.

When I am attending to people or things (e.g. a book/article/OpEd etc.) in the pursuit of answers or better understandings, do I ever consider who or what it is that I am actually looking for? Does it matter? If so, what things might help me to be more consciously attentive to this aspect of my practice of looking?

To what extent am I aware of the understandings, narratives, or agendas which influence what I choose to look at, or how I read what I see? Have I ever missed or misunderstood something because of these? Is this an area where I need to be more, or more critically, self-aware? If so, what strategies might help me with this?

Do I ever consciously look to people or things which wouldn't be my normal 'go to' resources when I am trying to deepen understanding or find solutions? If so, what, if anything has it added? If I don't, what is it that stops me?

Prayer

Jesus –
Sometimes those you encountered
failed to see you properly
because their focus was elsewhere,
or because you were not what they were expecting
or hoping for.

Sometimes we too
fail to see things properly –
because we have not thought
about what we are looking for,
or because what is in our head
blinds us
to what is in front of our eyes.

Help us to look more carefully
so that, when it is needed,
we can see beyond the obvious end point
or the easy answer;

help us to look more keenly
so that, when it matters,
we can see beyond that which is simply
a reflection of our own understanding
or a projection of our own desires or prejudices.

And in looking more faithfully
may we see the world more truly
and you more clearly
Amen.