

# Third Sunday of Advent

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## Introduction

The lectionary stays with John the Baptist for this third Sunday of Advent, called Gaudete (joyful) Sunday when a rose coloured candle is lit amidst the solemn purple ones as a foreshadowing of consolation.

This introduction to John the Baptist in the fourth gospel tells some interesting truths. Firstly it tells us of John's singular vocation and his commitment to his vocation. However it also tells us of emerging and conflicted factions within the early Christian community. Some, it seems, had been following John as the Messiah, so now this fourth (and ultimately final) gospel seeks to put some aspects of John the Baptist's purpose and vocation in the right light.

For the writer of John there are choices to be made: between light and darkness; between belief and unbelief; between truth and untruth. This can seem like an either/or, but as you read this gospel you also stumble across the writer's love of layers of understanding. Things can be understood on deeper levels, we understand, with prayer and reflection on these texts. So even our conflicts, our mistakes, our misunderstandings can be read at a deeper level.

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## 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.

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## Comment

The gospel of John, from which this week’s gospel text comes, has been the subject of much debate. While it’s fairly well established that it was the last of the gospels to be written, it is unsure when this gospel was written. There were schools of thought that put it as late as the year 110 AD, but in recent decades this timeline has been wound back to suggesting sometime in the late first century of the common era. There is sizeable scholarship that suggests John was writing to a particular community and scholars spent years exploring every amendment, every dialectical modification in the text to see through this gospel to the original receivers of it.

In recent years this interpretation, too, has fallen from primacy. It’s not exactly discredited, it’s just that it’s joined by a lot of questions.

What happens when major theories about the gospels suddenly become cast in a dubious light? We return to the text. We look to what the text is saying. We are careful about what the text does and does not say, and we are careful about naming our interpretations as interpretations, and not as cast-iron facts.

In many ways, this is also true for conflict. So often we can get lost in conflicts, forgetting even what the conflict is about. There are multiple and parallel stories of blame, and different stories become the main story, so much so that the original offence is lost in the library of interpretations and meanings that we have put on the original offence.

So we return to the text. The text of a gospel, the text of a pain.

The writer of this gospel loves large binary concepts: light/dark; belief/unbelief; day/night; truth/lies; understanding/misunderstanding. Such binaries can often contribute to a conflict, but for this gospel, that’s a conflict worthwhile having. This gospel — and John the Baptist’s character in particular — deals with firm choices and clarities. The character of John the Baptist in this text is introduced in such a way as to make no mistake:

“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.”

The writer might as well have said:

“He came as a witness to testify to the light (*He wasn’t the One*), so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light (*Seriously, he wasn’t the One*), but he came to testify to the light (*Testify, not be, see? seriously. Definitely. He wasn’t the one*).”

The writer is seeking to clarify any misunderstanding. Partly is a piece of irony that a text so intent on binaries — of clear choices between misunderstanding and understanding — needs to begin by clarifying any misunderstandings. But this, too, tells us a consoling tale. Misunderstandings happen, in the communities of the faithful. People read the same text, hear the same story, and come to different conclusions.

To find clarity requires clarity, time, attention to an original story, attention to the signs of the times, asking questions, hearing the answers to questions.

But we live with mystery too — we do not know the real story of the writers or receivers of the gospel of John. There are speculations, to be sure, but we have to live in the mid-space of incompleteness. Our conflicts can be like this too. While there are many conflicts with very clear narratives of blame and victimhood, there are some conflicts that seem to come from our souls: we can find ourselves continually misunderstanding or bumping into someone — a family member, a parent, a child, a colleague — and it can seem like there is something fundamentally un-understandable about the constant misunderstanding that seems to happen.

Some questions are layered. It is difficult to understand them. It is difficult to fathom the places from which our pain or protest come.

In this, may we be minded of the witness of John the Baptist. In the midst of all misunderstandings, he stands out like a beacon. He knew what his work was:

I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,  
'Make straight the way of the Lord,'

May we find our faithfulness, our vocation, what Ignatius of Loyola would call, our Principle and Foundation. And in the midst of the conflicts that we find hard to fathom, stay firm in those things we know will bring us life.

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## Response

As we journey through Advent towards Christmas, it may be that there are anxieties on the minds of you, or your friends, or family, or congregations.

As a silent reflection choose one word — one word only — that can sustain you during this time. It could be compassion, or love, or listening, or calm, or truth, or generosity, or rest.

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## Prayer

God of the gospels,  
Now we see you, now we don't.  
Sometimes even our own conflicts confound us  
and our lives and stories  
are difficult to read.  
When understanding evades us,  
may we find those things  
that will keep us steady:  
love, joy, faithfulness, generosity,  
hospitality, rest, solidarity, belief and truth.  
Because even though you're sometimes  
hard to follow, hard to find,  
we know that these things  
keep us steady.  
Amen.