

Sermon preached at St James's Piccadilly London

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Fearless hospitality

I don't think I am usually in the business of flattering you, but this morning I wanted to say to you that actually it's quite a heroic thing that you've come along to church this morning. In previous centuries people who came to this church came because it was fashionable, because it was the done thing. And also there wasn't much else to do on a Sunday. Now, of course many people work shifts on a Sunday and if you're not working, you can be shopping, taking your kids to football, going to the cinema, or doing a Park Run. So in previous centuries, my predecessors up in that pulpit would have had a captive audience.

Now, dare I say it, it's pretty unfashionable: in the UK at least, there's no social pressure to practise your faith or come to church, no expectation in society or at work or with your neighbours that you would come. In fact it's quite the opposite. And many of you, I know because you've told me, don't tell people either at work or locally that you are part of a church, in case they assume that you agree with some of the more, to you, unpalatable pronouncements of Christians in the media. It's not fashionable; you have said you even sometimes find it a bit embarrassing.

Personally, I don't mind that church is unfashionable – because it means that maybe we get a bit closer to John the Baptist – the figure who cries out from our gospel today.

John the Baptist – that's the more accurate translation of him than Baptist - is a prophet. In art, he is often shown as the last of the Hebrew prophets. There is one coming – he kept saying to the crowd –there is one coming – always pointing away from himself. It's not me, he said, and he called

people to both *repentance and belief*. (One without the other is a bit bleak – but that's another sermon).

He's not preaching in a church on a Sunday – he's a weekday prophet – talking to ordinary working people in the world they actually live in.

And today it's Jesus's question I want to think about Jesus asked the crowd who had gone to see John *What did you come out into the wilderness to see?*

Jesus asked the crowd who had gone out to the desert to see John *What did you come to see?*

And so I ask you directly today. What did you come to see? What are you doing here? There are lots of other gurus and healers and prophets you could be seeking out: what did you come to see?

This church is right in the middle of the city – which is a desert of sorts for many people. If our purpose is aligned with John the Baptist, if our life is Christ-shaped - we ask ourselves in turn what is it that we have to say? And to those who come, we ask, what is it you come out to see?

If I just take this week, people have come to see a huge variety of things in the past few days here.

You may have seen us in the Metro newspaper on Wednesday. On Tuesday night, we held a concert here in aid of the Princes Trust and Cheryl's Trust, which raised over £200,000 for disadvantaged young people in Newcastle. On that day, people came out to see Cheryl with Liam Payne from One Direction, Olly Murs and Paul Potts.

Yesterday a crowd gathered from Transylvania and the UK to remember Elisabeth Ratiu, who sat over there in her wheelchair until her death last month. We heard stories of Romanian revolutions, soldiers ransacking her house in Bucharest, and a long life lived with considerable courage and flair.

And yesterday morning, a small group from this congregation opened the doors and invited people who are somewhere in the asylum claiming process – people with no recourse to public funds – to see if anyone would like breakfast. We had a lovely meal together with 12 or 13 people from Uganda, Iraq, Nigeria, Ghana – and we're already looking forward to seeing them again.

What do you come out to see? What do you hope for when you come to church? Maybe your expectations are quite simple; a hymn that you like, some silence, some one to talk to? Space from your obligations, a conversation that makes you feel better, some comfort in a chilly world?

It is a way of framing what is a more fundamental question: what are you searching for?

Go deeper.

If we are aligned with John the Baptist, then we gather here together to listen for God's authentic word which carries deep spiritual significance for life, not just a Sunday feel good experience. For many of us, we would probably most closely describe church as a top up of spiritual stuff, a reminder that it's all in there somewhere before we head out again into real life where we won't give all this a second thought? But this baptiser is saying something quite different. For those of us who come to be church here, what we are offered as individuals has depth and strength, challenge and comfort in equal measure – which in turn allows us to welcome others. In the paraphrased words of St Ignatius who pioneered contemplative prayer.....

Our only desire and our one choice should be this: I want and I choose what better leads to God's deepening life in me. Ignatius of Loyola (adapted).

And so in the spirit of John the Baptist, what we discover together here, what we say, what we listen to, is orientating, and re-orientating ourselves to the source of our life and hope. It is re-orientating our spirits: to awaken, nurture, cultivate, that desire in me – to choose what better leads to God's deepening life in me.

Closely related to the question Jesus asked about the people who went to see John – what did you come out to see? – closely related to that is an invitation that Jesus issued to two people he met – Come and see. And this is the same invitation to you and to me – come and see. *Come and see life as I see it, come and see others as I see them, come and see yourself as I see you. Choose to get well, go deeper into what you desire underneath all your superficial desires for approval, for companionship, for a successful life.*

I've had conversations with some of you about the divisions that were exposed by the referendum in this country earlier in the year, and by the election of the Republican nominee in the United States. Whatever your own view or vote, everyone is agreed that the division both of these votes exposed is deep and for many, was unexpected. Votes this weekend in both Austria and Italy may reveal divisions in those countries too.

And to address this situation, what can we say? There's lots that politicians are trying to say, a lot that artists and musicians are trying to say – and the church collectively has said quite a bit too.

To the competing visions of society that we have debated recently, I want to add another, which comes from the Scripture today. A vision of human life, empathetic with all that lives, a vision of living to live by.

This poetic politics here from Isaiah is offering a totally different vision.

Is this what you have come to see?

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid. The calf and the lion and the fatling together and a little child shall lead them.

The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain.

And so this is the answer to the question – what did you come out to see? This vision from Isaiah is what's on offer here. So if in my heart I would prefer to be tribal, if I prefer to hate or judge any of those who voted differently from me or believe differently from me then I should leave now. Of course it's nicer to think of ourselves as the lamb, the the kid, the calf and the child in all these scenarios – but there are also situations in which we are the wolf, the leopard, the lion and the asp. We're all of them at different times.

When people tell me, as they often delight in doing, that the church is irrelevant, it's hard not to agree to some extent. When we are arguing about sexuality or the place of women or the style of worship songs – this has frankly little bearing on the daily struggles of people juggling two jobs, trying to keep up with the mortgage, handling a teenager out of control, sharing one room with the whole family. But the vision of life we are offered this morning is a vision to live by and is a response, a serious response, to what the Director of Chatham House, the foreign policy think tank in our parish, calls a "Trumpy world".

Despair is a luxury when we look at Aleppo, DRC, Hebron, the Philippines, or when we look at the doorways of Piccadilly, the hidden sofa surfing of a whole population, the aching loneliness of many people isolated in a crowded city.

For us as a Christian community, it's our privilege to pray for a spirit of John the Baptist and to ask that our lives as individuals and together are shaped into Christ-shaped lives, infused with and illuminated by both celebration and forgiveness, repentance and belief.

And in order to teach us that, John the Baptist is blowing apart the categories his audience are comfortable with. In the gospel today, it's racial purity claimed by a religious and political elite. Don't you dare, says John, claim racial purity of any kind. God can –from these stones- raise up people whose acceptance will never depend on the place of their birth or the ethnicity into which they were born. In this spirit, John the Baptist might readily blow apart the categories we have become polarised by: leave and remain, poor and rich, rural and urban, north and south. It is blasphemous says John. Stop it.

What they came out to see was the Baptist – like the ice bucket challenge that was so popular last Christmas – a bracing, cleansing, never-too-late-to-start-again kind of action that gives us a response to the divisions that worry us.

And what was said for me at my baptism?

I turn to Christ

I repent of my sins

I renounce evil.

So simple – and of course immensely complex to live out.

Do you turn to Christ? *Every day. Every hour of every day – because I keep turning away -* Do you repent of your sins? *Absolutely – joyfully and with a huge sense of relief – I don't have to carry these burdens – it's possible for this anxiety to be lifted – I totally – O thank God – I totally repent.*

Do you renounce evil? *With all my heart, with everything I have – I renounce the hate of which I know I am capable – the resentments and the self-absorption that finds horrific expression in the violence of the world.*

And as I contemplate these promises – so simple and yet so profound - I find that these days, I have little patience with Christians who don't want to talk about sin. And I have no patience with Christians who always want to talk about sin. And our church nationally, globally, often seems to be stuck in one or the other.

To the people who never want to talk about sin, I want to shake them and say – look around you, and look inside you. Who can look at the history of the 20th and 21st centuries so far and not have some way of dealing with the destruction wrought by the obstinate self interest of which human beings are capable. And look inside your own heart. Do you never wilfully turn away from what you know is the life giving choice? Do you never close your heart? Of course you do. I do. My reaction to Christians who don't want to talk about sin is a bit like Advent itself – wake up.

To the people who *always* want to talk about sin, I want to say that this kind of spirituality is narcissism masquerading as humility; that peddles the lie that you or I should be fixated on our worthlessness and despite our protestations are simply too bad for forgiveness. It's unredeemed and has taken no account of the dual call to repentance and belief proclaimed by John the Baptiser.

Our church, our community, our relationships and our identity is rooted in these baptism promises. And this gives us, in an uncertain world, our agenda, our response, our vision; which is deceptively simple and infinitely complex in its outworkings; I turn to Christ, I repent of my sins, I renounce evil.

The Baptiser calls us to be both undefended and undefeated.

This baptism asks us into a life, rooted in love which is fearless. And from that baptised life to extend fearless hospitality, and to build fearless community.

I witnessed this yesterday with the little group who had gathered to make breakfast. It takes courage to invite people because they might not come. It takes courage to cook food because guests might not like it. It takes courage to start an open ended conversation with a stranger because you don't know where it will lead. This fearless hospitality was shown on our behalf by this group yesterday. It will also be shown by the Night Shelter beginning on Tuesday this week – we will welcome guests who are living outside to come for a hot meal, for companionship, and to sleep overnight here in these pews where you are now.

In response to a world where settled assumptions are being challenged, where the incidences of hate crime in our city have risen, where successive political, economic and religious leaders have left people ignored and left behind, our agenda, our response is clear:

We turn to Christ
We repent of our sins
We renounce evil

And from this we become fearless in our welcome and willingness to make friends and find companions across any possible religious, political, racial, economic division that we can imagine.

Fearlessness comes from our baptism; fearlessness is I turn to Christ. I turn to Christ right in the middle of my intoxicating fear that I think might threaten to overwhelm me. I turn to Christ. I choose life.

And we pray for an ever renewed and renewing spirit of fearless hospitality – hospitable within ourselves of all the bits of us we'd rather weren't there – and fearlessly hospitable to others.

If you are in any kind of trouble, you are welcome here because you are welcome to God. If you are in debt and have no idea how to get out of it, you are welcome here. If you are living with a diagnosis that has shocked you, you are welcome here. If all

the publicity given to the footballers abused by their coaches has reminded you of the memories that haunt you, you are welcome here. If you have serious questions for a God who let your baby die, you are welcome here. If you are estranged from people you love, you are welcome here. If you are angry that life hasn't turned out as you wanted, you are welcome here. If you have spent time in prison – whatever your crime and for however long you were there, you are welcome here. If you are desperate for work or stuck in a job you don't like, you are welcome here.

Why? Not because we made this up somehow – but because we have a vision of life that is interdependent, just and beautiful. We hear it again in Advent in the prophets and the gospels – and we choose over and over again.....

I want and I choose what better leads to Gods deepening life in me

We turn to Christ, we repent of our sins, we renounce evil. Amen.

Lucy Winkett