



Isaiah 11.1-10
Matthew 3.1-12
4th December 2022

Imperfect Signposts

Lord God – our prayer is that the written word will point us to Christ, the Living Word. So, in his name we pray and for his voice we listen. Amen.

So, here we are again. If you've travelled this Advent Journey before using the set readings of the day, you'll know that sooner or later you're going to run in to that badly dressed prophet like figure of John the Baptist.

He comes across to us as something of a maverick; and one definition of that is to be a *lone dissenter*. Which all rather concurs with the description of his being that lonely voice crying out in the wilderness.

Yet, as is sometimes the case with the unusual, people flocked to see him and hear his challenge. He drew the crowds; something that inevitably irritated the Establishment.

Even more irritating was his success in winning people over. It seems these wilderness sermons touched the hearts of those who had ventured out of the city to listen. In this traditional place of spiritual encounter, the desert, they reconnected with God and were willing to live re-oriented lives. So, John baptised them.

Now there's often a debate around baptism with questions like when baptise and how often? In our day and age some people from one tradition, who have been baptised maybe as infants, start going to a church that has Believer's Baptism. Should they be baptised again? I can even hear the sharp intake of breath that would happen in some ministers' meetings if you even dared ask that question. My old boss, who never ever asked for people to be baptised again, was also someone who never refused them if they asked. He would call it: *completing their baptismal experience*.

Well, I think those sharp intakes of breath would have been even more pronounced in John's day. For essentially, he was baptising people, probably Jewish people by and large, as if they were entering for the first time into the faith. Yet here were people who'd been practicing faith for years, but now they were submitting to the same baptism of someone who was joining their tradition for the

very first time.

It's as if John's baptism was that of a fresh start, a new beginning. Understanding their faith differently.

John did that by being a signpost. In traditional prophetic style he speaks for God, and in his case, points people to Jesus. So, greeting his cousin he says: *Behold the Lamb of God*, and protests he's not worthy to tie up the laces of Christ's sandals.

John is in the business of deflection. *I am not the one*, he says, *but I'm pointing to the One who is.*

And all of this becomes a message of hope and seems to have touched the hearts and minds of many.

Now, I have a confession for you this morning. And this, of course becomes a wake-up moment in the sermon! When Amela asked me for some Advent and Christmas words to decorate the church I gave her a list without the word *hope*. I missed the most obvious of all Advent words, but ironically ended my email list of other words with the phrase *Hope that helps!*

Well, it is hope that helps, even if you miss it off the list! It helps us greet the future differently. And that's what John was doing. He preached a message of hope, hope found in Jesus, and a hope that manifested itself in a changed life of compassion and faithfulness.

And yet.... Yes, there is a *but* coming in today's sermon. John lost that hope in Jesus for a time. This is surely a really big surprise in the story of these cousins. Initially they seem so united and singing from the same hymn sheet. Yet, and possibly even because of the trauma of it, after John's arrest and imprisonment as he languishes in gaol, as the mission of Jesus, in his eyes, seems to lose momentum, he begins to doubt and asks: *Are you really the one, or should we look for another?*

I always think there's something mournfully tragic in that enquiry.

We are all imperfect signposts.

And I know it's easy to get impatient with bad signage. I do! Especially when driving in North America. Now, my apologies to our cousins across the Pond, but basically, I don't quite get the American or Canadian system of motorway, or freeway, signs that name the road at the next junction rather than the number of the road or area of the city. As a tourist driver, who clearly hasn't done his homework, I want to know that the next junction will take me to the A442, not

Chestnut Avenue. Chestnut Avenue could be anywhere, it's just not helpful... oh dear, I'm starting to rant!

I remember tackling Washington's Beltway, the equivalent of the M25, and coming off at a completely wrong junction during a journey to Mount Vernon, it was probably signposted Wisteria Drive, or something! The boys in the back shouted out: *Look Dad, the Pentagon*. Great! I said. Uttering rude words under my breath as that meant we were now going in completely the wrong direction.

Yet, it's the same with us in The Church. We, you and me, are not always the best signposts for God. We know that and often we would own that. And I'm not sure what to do about that because often people outside the Church have expectations of us inside the Church that are really far too high.

So, although there are many times when our behaviour falls short, we have to, in some way, say that doesn't invalidate the message of love and justice that we believe in. We are imperfect messengers, and although we don't want that to excuse us or become an inadequate norm to describe us, part of the message of the gospel is that God loves imperfect people, God forgives and restores imperfect people, and God calls imperfect people, like us, to mend our ways, re-orientate our lives, and keep on striving in our pilgrimage to be more loving and more faithful in our discipleship of Jesus Christ.

I'm grateful for John the Baptist this morning, painted in the round by the Gospel writers, *warts and all* – as Cromwell might have said.

I'm grateful that although I'm an imperfect signpost, my calling is still to seek to point myself and others to the love of God as expressed in the face of Jesus Christ.

And how could it be any other than this? When Jesus says: *And you will be my witnesses* he knew Peter denied him and Judas betrayed him. Yet he also knew that Andrew took his brother Peter along to meet with Jesus. Andrew was one of Jesus' first signposts.

Now, I've already spoken about road signage earlier in this talk, but I want to start to bring our thoughts to an end this morning with the idea that often signposts can only take us so far on a journey.

In particular, I'm thinking of those *Road Closed* signs, followed by diversion boards. You somehow know it's going to be an adventure when you come across these, because usually they peter out all too soon. So now you are off your usual route and basically, it's down to you to complete the journey.

Take that as a metaphor and it's good to have people like Andrew or John around pointing us to Jesus. It's wonderful when a parent does the same for a child, a Youth Leader at church for a youngster, a good friend for a neighbour. Yet that's all we can be, signposts. The journey has to be completed by the child, youngster or neighbour themselves. We all have to make that journey of faith consciously, purposefully and determinedly as individuals. It has to become *my* journey, as well as *our* journey.

So, we seek to be signposts and nothing is more thrilling when fellow travellers decide to join us on this pilgrimage of faith.

Malvern, where we used to live, still has some gas lamps in the town centre. C.S.Lewis went to school in Malvern, and some say the lamppost in his Narnia stories is based on those Malvern gas lamps.

Well, there is another story about gas lamps from another writer that goes like this.

John Ruskin was someone who passionately believed in social justice and spent much of his fortune setting up guilds that employed the poor, like the St George's Guild in Paddington and schools for the disadvantage in Camberwell and Chelsea.

Well, Ruskin was once sitting with a friend in the dusk of an evening and watched the lamplighter do his work. One by one he lit every lamp in the street and then disappeared from view. Commenting that as he went the lamplighter had left the lights burning brightly, Ruskin said: *There, that is what I mean by a real Christian. You can trace their course by the light they leave behind.*

Isn't that what it means to be a signpost?

On this 2nd Sunday of Advent we not only look at John the Baptist and acknowledge he was an imperfect signpost – we own that title too for ourselves. Rejoicing that God, in his grace, still calls us to point others to his love, expressed in the face of Jesus.

May we respond to that call in the name of Jesus, our is both our greatest signpost and destination, the one who showed us *the way, the truth and the life*.
Amen