

Brancepeth sermon
12 January 2025

Acts 8.14-17

Luke 3.15-17, 21-22

Psalm 29

Open our ears, O Lord,
to hear your word and know your voice.
Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills,
that we may serve you today and always. Amen

I don't know if it is too late to say 'Happy New Year'
but last week, when it might have been *more* appropriate,
the snow kept most people away.

So: 'Happy New Year!'

At least, I hope it has been happy for you so far,
despite the snow and frost and ice and cold...

I must admit that I find January difficult:

I know the year has turned,

but the mornings are still so dark,

and the movement by which sunrise is edging earlier

is still so slow as to be basically imperceptible.

It seems appropriate to me that January is named after

the two-faced Roman god Janus,

because we're right on the cusp of the year

right at the turn from darkness to light,

and we look both ways - caught between the two.

And the reason I mention this is because

John the Baptist, standing in his camel hair robe

on the banks of the Jordan River,

is a Janus figure too - someone on the cusp,

looking backwards and forwards,

caught between the old and the new,

yearning for redemption, and *just* glimpsing it begin to arrive.

Jesus at one point says something strange about John.

‘Truly I tell you,’ he says,

among those born of women

no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist;

yet the *least* in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.’

John is, in other words, both the greatest and the least,

a witness to the kingdom of heaven,

but yet not himself a participant in it.

He’s on the cusp, standing right at the turning point.

And I want to add to that, and say

- if you’ll forgive the impertinence -

that it seems to me that John, in what he says at the Jordan,

is both right and wrong.

First of all, he is clearly right to tell the crowds who come to him

that he is *not* the messiah.

And he is clearly right that

one who is greater than him is on his way -

one of whom God the Father is about to say,

‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’

John rightly points forward, away from himself,
and towards Jesus, who is on the cusp of arriving.

And yet there's something askew, here, as well.

John expresses the greatness of Jesus by saying,

'I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals.'

That is, John imagines Jesus *great*,

by imagining himself *small* -

imagining himself, perhaps, approaching Jesus as a servant,

bowing low before him,

but not being bold enough to approach too close,

not daring to reach out and touch this great man's feet.

'I am not worthy', he says.

And yet, for those of us who know how the story will go on,

we know that - years from now, at the last supper -

Jesus is going to show *his* greatness

precisely by bowing down in front of his disciples,

by untying the thongs of *their* sandals,

and then by reaching out and touching their feet -

and by wiping from them all the day's grime,
the dust and the dung.

The one about whom God the Father says,
'with you I am well pleased'
is going to rewrite what it means to be great,
in a way that John does not yet imagine.

Can I admit at this point
that there is a prayer we say nearly every week -
though not this week, as this is a service of the word -
a prayer that I have some problems with,
for reasons directly connected to what I have just said.
I'm talking about the 'prayer of humble access', which begins
'We do not presume
to come to this your table, merciful Lord,
trusting in our own righteousness,
but in your manifold and great mercies.

We are not worthy

so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table.'

And, just as with John the Baptist's
way of proclaiming Jesus' greatness

I want to say that those words are both true and untrue.

They are, first of all, quite true.

If we think we can *earn* our place at Jesus' table,

if we think that we get to eat with him

because we are somehow righteous enough,

if we think that we measure up

or that we have achieved enough,

and because of *that* we belong at this table -

well, then we're simply wrong,

and we haven't understood at all what is going on.

And so it is absolutely right to say,

'We do not presume

to come to this your table, merciful Lord,

trusting in our own righteousness.'

But I can't see that the Jesus who washes his disciples' feet
says to us, 'You lot are *un*worthy;
you don't deserve even the crumbs from under my table -
but I tell you what: out of my mercy,
I'll let you in despite that.

But just you make sure that you remember
how unworthy you remain!

No, I think Jesus says, 'You've got it all wrong.

I don't measure worthiness like that *at all*.

If you think the important thing is how worthy or unworthy
you might be to sit at this table and eat with me,
you have misunderstood what this table is about.'

Because this is the Jesus who gets down on his knees
and washes *all* his disciples feet -
he washes even *Judas's* feet,
knowing what is about to happen,
and what Judas is about to do.

Jesus gets down and washes all his disciples' feet,
without regard to their worthiness or unworthiness.

Jesus' love, Jesus' care, Jesus' welcome,
Jesus' invitation to sit and eat with him
simply has *nothing to do* with our
worthiness or unworthiness.

When Simon Peter says, in effect,
'Don't wash my feet, Lord, you're too great and I'm not worthy',
Jesus' reply is - again, in effect -
'No, Peter, you have misunderstood what's going on here.'

It's not about worthiness or unworthiness;
it's not about the kind of greatness
that would insist upon worthiness at all.

Of course it matters how we behave,
how much good we do, how much kindness we show,
how much we follow Jesus' commands
to love God and to love neighbour.

But those are not things we do
in order to become worthy to be with Jesus,
or out of shame at our unworthiness;

they are *responses* to the Jesus
whose first and foundational response to us,
is to invite us in,
to bend down to untie the thongs of our sandals,
to wash our feet,
and to invite us to his table,
whoever we are, and whatever we have done.

And it does seem a bit strange to me, in the light of that,
every time we hear the invitation to sit and eat with him,
for us to keep on saying,
'We are not worthy! We are not worthy!' -
as if we thought that mattered.

As I say, just like the words of John the Baptist
at the side of the Jordan,
those words are both true and untrue -
or so it seems to me.

I think the same is true when John says that Jesus
'will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire'.

Once again, he is certainly not wrong;
he is a true witness here to Jesus.

But it is also clear that what he imagines
when he speaks of this baptism with the Spirit and with fire,
is of God bringing about a great *separation*.

The Spirit will rush in upon God's people,
and turn them into an army, a righteous army,
and when that happens,
their enemies will be burnt up like chaff.

The greatness John imagines for Jesus is, it seems,
looking back, Janus-like, to the ways of God in the past,
perhaps to the greatness of a great warrior king like David.

So John the Baptist *has* seen truly from where he stands
on the bank of the river,
he has seen that Jesus is the messiah,
and that his coming will change everything -
but he is not in a position to see the whole picture.

Because when Jesus *does* baptize with the Holy Spirit,
and when tongues of fire *do* come down from heaven
as part of that baptism,
it creates not *separation* but *communion*.

When the Spirit is poured out on God's people,
they start speaking the good news of Jesus' welcome
in the languages of all the nations around them -
friends and foes, neighbours and strangers.

And in our reading from Acts, we heard about
Peter and John going to Samaria.

And that meant, for Galilean Jews like Peter and John,
committed to the Jerusalem temple
and to the religious life gathered around it,
they were going to their enemies, to ancient antagonists,
to people who they believed worshipped God wrongly,
and who they knew rejected the ways of people like them.

But when Peter and John make this journey
amongst their enemies,
the Spirit doesn't rush upon *them*

and turn them into warriors,
enabling them to fight and defeat these enemies,
or raining down fire upon them
and burning them up like chaff.

Instead the Spirit falls upon the Samaritans
just like it fell upon the disciples in the upper room,
and it *fills them up*,
joining them to the community of Jesus' disciples.

When Jesus baptises with the Spirit and with fire,
it brings people *together*, it creates *joining*,
and the enemy that it overthrows and burns like chaff
is enmity itself – division itself, separation itself.

Finally, I think that Jesus' *true* greatness –
a greatness that John points to but does not yet comprehend –
is shown in this story by the very fact that Jesus gets baptised.

We heard the version of the story of Jesus' baptism told by Luke,
but in Matthew's version we get a bit more detail.

When Jesus comes forward to be baptised, Matthew tells us that

‘John would have prevented him, saying,

“*I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?*”

Again, John seems to think that Jesus’ greatness is such

that the only way for it to be properly displayed

is for *Jesus* to be the one who baptises,

and for him *not* to be the one who is baptised.

It ought to be Jesus who is the one who stands above others

and pushes them down into the water,

rather than the one who himself goes down into that water

at the baptiser’s feet.

And that, again, suggests that John,

standing where he stands and seeing what he sees,

has not yet been shown what Jesus’ true greatness entails.

Jesus’ greatness –

his ability to show us the life of God made tangible in our midst –

is found in his *willingness* to join with us, to go down into the waters with us,

to go right down into the depths with us,

and to accompany us back to the surface.

Jesus' greatness is shown in his readiness
to be there with us, as one of us, joined to us,
refusing to be apart from us -
however worthy or unworthy we might be -
accompanying us every step of the way.

The greatness of Jesus -
the greatness that John *did* see, even if he saw it only in part -
that greatness is shown by the greatness of Jesus' welcome,
by his willingness to untie the sandals and wash the feet
of anyone, however worthy or unworthy they might feel,
however worthy or unworthy they might *be*;
by his willingness to pour out his Spirit
upon ancient enemies as well as old friends;
by his readiness to go down into the waters with us
and to come up out of them with us;
by his ability to create joining, to create fellowship,
to bring us into new life together.

And it is *that* Jesus,
upon whom the Spirit rests in the form of a dove,
to whom the Father says
'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

Amen