

Witnesses to Jesus Christ

Sermon for the Third Sunday in Advent, Year B, 17/12/2023

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Magnificat; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28; John 1:6-8, 19-28

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

In an age of too much information, with talking heads of every stripe competing for our attention, we need trustworthy people to help us cut through and zero in. That is, we need witnesses, who can testify from their own experience that what they commend to us is the truth. And this is especially the case when so many institutions have lost our trust, with little moral authority remaining these days for politics, or the banks, or the media, or even the churches.

But what does it mean for us to be Christian witnesses? How can we join the Prophet Isaiah today, who was veritably magnetised by the word of God and made a witness to God's purposes? John the Baptizer and the Blessed Virgin Mary likewise were galvanised by the need to magnify Jesus Christ, who addressed them and claimed their lives, and who presses this gracious invitation on us, too, and on others through us. You have to admit that this doesn't sound very Anglican.

I remember a parishioner at Ainslie, when I'd preached on evangelism, telling me at the door afterwards that he couldn't think of any circumstances in which he'd be willing to talk to someone about Jesus Christ. Believing that Jesus in person is special, beyond some vague teaching about him or some unspecific moral sensibility, can be a bridge too far for many Anglicans—and so what's there to talk about, let alone give witness to?

Of course, a major problem with being a witness is that lots of people have no interest in anything we might say or do as Christian witnesses. Indeed, friends, this calling is so challenging and so potentially unrewarding that even clergy give up on it, contenting themselves in their parishes with social work and catering.

But John the Baptizer's life wasn't like that. He was marked by God's call in Jesus Christ to be his witness, ever since the unborn John the Baptist leapt in Elizabeth's womb, acknowledging the unborn Jesus in Mary's womb—a case of foetal attraction(!). And from that lifetime overshadowed by the coming Jesus, John the Baptizer testifies in today's Gospel to the greatness of who's coming after and what he'll bring.

Mary, like John the Baptizer—her fellow Advent witness—is a figure of patient, receptive Israel. She embodies God's great fulfillment of Israel's calling in her Annunciation. Then she goes on in her Magnificat to praise and magnify God for the ancient promises now coming true in Jesus Christ.

But what of us, if this prospect of being a witness seems remote, even a bit overripe? It may help to know that this calling for us to be witnesses comes in the broader context of the Church and its Eucharist. I mention two things.

First, there's the context of the Eucharist itself. Here we're caught up in the drama of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. And friends, this is far more like playing sport than just watching sport, as with mind and voice, with eating and drinking, with posture and physical actions, we participate physically in meeting Christ. Our Eucharistic liturgy is God's own declaration of who God is, and in that context comes the call and the encouragement for us to become who we most truly are—that is, to become witnesses of a new and bigger and richer vision of reality than most people could scarcely imagine.

And from the liturgy we pass to the Church itself, and the prior setting that it provides for our individual Christian lives. This is what Paul sets out in our Epistle today. Here's a collective calling, with different orders of ministry in the Church each deserving its proper respect. Here's a vision of being a different sort of human group, set apart from the world of dog eat dog—which is as much a description of the Roman Empire in Paul's day as it is of today's neoliberal empire in the West.

So, friends, as we're shaped by the discipline of being the Church—which is the part of humanity being transformed into the image of Jesus Christ—we can each of us become more conscious and active participants in its new reality. This is why I keep telling you that it's so important for us to be here with our eyes and ears and hearts and minds open. Because in the Church and its Eucharist, and by becoming the people that the Eucharistic vision calls and empowers us to be, becoming a witness can begin to make sense and to seem accessible. Even for us Anglicans.

The Lord be with you ...