

The Third Sunday of Advent 2014 – John 1

“The one who is coming..; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals”¹ – but then I guess none of us are.

None of us can hope to know the mind of God, but we can hope to know better the will of God. The mind of God is for God alone to know, but His will we can discern, just like John did in the wilderness. But John’s holiness is only one characteristic element of the story that enables John to discern that will; the other is the wilderness, the stillness. We cannot get to know the will of God through actions or efforts, but only through obedience, silence, contemplation, prayer, devotion.

We live in a world that demands that we do, but to discern the mind of God we have to simply be. Actions only ever get in the way. Only stillness within our being can help us to reflect and discern. In such a task orientated world we can convince ourselves that it is our actions alone that will bring us to God, but often actions can be as damaging as not. Interfering in a situation can lead to as much fall-out as heal-in – it is a perilous business for us and those who are affected by our actions. Christians that only focus on doing risk making the same mistakes time and again in their efforts to do good. As the old adage would have it, “the road to hell is paved with good intentions”. Good works do not mark a Christian – a person with any kind of belief structure can do good works. No, what marks a committed Christian is their ability and perseverance to be constantly searching to do the will of God.

Because God is ultimate goodness, our efforts cannot go wrong so long as we discern his will. Of course, God wants us to make a difference to the world, but first he needs to make a difference to us.

Even in such a task orientated world, we can of course still see glimpses of Jesus’s personality in the world around us. The most notable place is our scriptures, but we can also see it in the faces of others; in the creativity of their writing, their speech, their artistry, their kindness or their vulnerability. We see it in creation and in architecture. But, with the exception of scripture, we cannot hope to get to know much more of the will of God through these things – more often than not we simply see what we want to see.

So I guess the real question is, do we really want to get to know the will of God or do we only want God to know our will for him? For John the Baptist, his entire life was spent getting to know the will of God and acting in a way that he felt best served God’s long-term plan. He was clear that things were not to be comfortable for him in the role he was to play in the redemption story of humanity, but he was obedient to it non-the-less. It was John, through his words and his baptism that paved the way for God to become man in Christ, just as it was Mary’s obedience and attentiveness to God that enabled the Christ child to be born at all. Both showed a genuine passion for God and a longing for holiness. The two most important people of the Gospel aside from Jesus Christ himself, do not run away or stamp their own agenda on what they hear from God, but both simply show prayerfulness and holiness; an obedience to His will and an attentiveness to His wishes.

¹ John 1:27

In the early centuries of the church, there were those who chose to dedicate their entire lives to contemplation and prayer. Their dedication to holiness meant that they had the opportunity to reflect upon the human condition and how God, through Christ, was engaging with the whole human race. They became known as the Desert Fathers and some of their wisdom remains today in great sayings that continue to nurture the church as it strives to search for the will of God.

One such holy man was known as Abba, or Father, Joseph. One day another holy person, Abba Lot, went to see Abba Joseph and said to him, "Abba, as far as I can I say my Little Office. I fast a little. I pray. I meditate. I live in peace and as far as I can. I purify my thoughts. What else am I to do?"

Then the old man stood up, stretched his hands towards heaven and his fingers became like ten lamps of fire, and he said to him, "If you will, you can become all flame."

Do we recognise the beauty of God and the Glory of Jesus Christ? Are we prepared to be so filled with the Spirit that we become all flame? Just like John and Mary, God calls each of us to be obedient and attentive. The question is not whether he calls us, but whether we are willing to listen. Rarely, will the call lead to the kind of action that makes us feel like superheroes – there can only ever be one of those and that's Jesus Christ himself. Certainly, it will lead to more attentiveness, obedience and prayerfulness. Often, it may lead us to a place that we are not used to being, and thus irritation and frustration, as it takes us out of our familiar task cantered world and into the real world of stillness and flame; the heartbeat of creation.

"If you will, you can become all flame" – burning with the glory of Jesus Christ.

It is here that we will be renewed in our callings. Callings to be prophets in the wilderness, good Samaritans on the street corner, prodigal sons returning to the homestead or a thousand other things. Our potential is limitless and God's will for us beyond our wildest imaginings, all we need is perseverance and resilience to return to God in prayer and holiness each time we fall.

In another recorded piece of wisdom from the Desert Fathers; A monk came looking for some guidance and encouragement and went to Abba Sisoius.

He asked, "What am I to do since I have fallen?" The Abba replied, "Get up!"

"I did get up, but I fell again". Abba Sisoius said; "Get up!"

I did, but I must admit that I fell once again. What should I do?"

Abba Sisoius replied, "Do not fall down without getting up!"

Amen