

20140706FourthAfterPentecostSermon

Last week I tried to use my sermon to explore what it means to be a prophet. We looked, if you remember, at Jeremiah and the false prophet Hananiah. We looked too at Jesus' statement that whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward. And I suggested that we are all called to be prophets. But I did say that often it is difficult for us to discern who was a true and who was a false prophet.

If you have difficulty doing that, you are in good company because that is what John the Baptist was battling with while he was in prison. He sent some of **his** disciples to Jesus to ask if Jesus really was The One, the Messiah they expected or if they should go back to waiting for the real promised Messiah. Was John, the one sent 'to prepare the way of the Lord' getting doubtful about the identity of Jesus? Or was John still pretty sure that Jesus was The One but had his disciples ask Jesus this question as a subtle way of hinting that Jesus should get on with it.

So Jesus had to send word back to John that more was going on than John maybe knew but also to point out that as it turned out, neither John nor Jesus was exactly what anyone expected. All these events happen in the verse before this morning's Gospel begins.

In verses 16-19, the first part of our Gospel, Jesus pretty much says that it is an error to look at who he was and what he did and then choose to criticise him for those words and actions. To paraphrase his response Jesus could be saying: "The problem with you people, is that you want it to always go your way. You want to force every prophet into your own pre-conceived mould. If you don't like the message, you pick up on some minor point in the messenger and use it as an excuse to reject the person entirely. John never eats and you say he's nuts. I do enjoy eating and drinking and you say I'm a glutton. It's high time you listen to what God's prophets say and stop looking for excuses to block out God's truth."

Think of it for moment. Both Jesus and John the Baptist could be easily caricatured by their opponents. John was an abstemious sort who dressed weirdly, talked weirdly, and was given to many excesses in what he claimed. So, those who wanted to dismiss John as being of no importance in God's grand scheme of things said, "He's nuts. He's got a demon in him. He's a few pennies short of a shilling." Jesus, on the other hand, appears to have been anything but abstemious. When people had a wedding, they wanted Jesus at the party (and according to John's gospel, Jesus was even good at providing a whole winery's worth of good wine for guests who were already a bit tipsy). Or when people threw dinner parties, they invited him and at those gatherings, Jesus was not adverse to asking for a second helping of the lamb stew. So those who wanted to dismiss Jesus as being a good non-candidate for Messiah said, "That wine-drinking and KFC-consuming glutton doesn't look a thing like God and so can't possibly be God's anointed one – God's Christ." In other words they are saying, "We'll know God's servants when we see them and these two just don't make the grade."

About twenty years ago now, Gerard Hughes, a Jesuit priest from the UK, wrote a book called, "God of Surprises". It is a classical book on spirituality still worth reading today. It tells the readers that God is not predictable. God pops up in surprising places, including in the minds and souls of people who do not believe in God, follow God or want anything to do with God.

The people of Jesus day felt they knew what the Messiah would be like and Jesus didn't fit the bill. But God has God's own ideas about what is right and proper. The God of Scripture is consistent in surprising us. In fact, a good bit of God's self-revelation happens precisely in those surprises. The Old Testament tells of many of these. Who would have guessed that God would have decided to start a mighty nation through a wrinkled old couple in the retirement home—two people who had not managed to generate children even when they were young and virile? Who would have guessed that God's favourites would always been the less likely of the possible candidates: crafty and wily old Jacob is favoured over his more staid brother Esau; the young braggart Joseph chosen over his more stable and hard-working brothers; Moses the stutterer becomes God's mouthpiece instead of his more golden-tongued brother Aaron; the runt of the Jesse family, David, gets elevated over all the other sons of Jesse. God seems always chooses the less likely of the options.

And God shows up in other surprising places. The Israelite spies who visit Jericho make a beeline for a nearest brothel where they meet Rahab, the madam who God uses to preach a sermon to those spies. God delivers the

Ninevites from certain doom by pressing into service the very reluctant and argumentative Jonah – one commentator says that Jonah had a personality that could curdle milk! God frees the Israelites from their long captivity in Babylon by turning the Persian (and pagan) King Cyrus into a messiah – someone who is blessed and anointed by God.

These surprises are not limited to the Old Testament. God starts out the New Testament with its own surprise BANG by implanting his Son into the uterus of an unsuspecting virgin named Mary and having him delivered into a donkey's feeding trough.

Small wonder that John the Baptist had his doubts as he looked at the shape and content of Jesus' ministry and said, "This can't be. He can't be the one." But John should have first looked in the mirror. You see, if God could use the zany son of Zechariah and Elizabeth . . . well, there was just no telling what God might do next! God might just as well use you or me. Small wonder Jesus ends up saying in verse 25 that praise is to be given to God for revealing the deep truths of salvation not to the wise and learned but to infants."

Luke Michael Anderson is to be baptised today. His parents Steve and Megan will be realising already that children have a vast capacity to surprise and to be surprised! We who are slightly longer of tooth than Luke might cynically think that nothing surprises us anymore. Well, be prepared to be surprised!

Firstly, by finding me actually talking about a sporting event! With the World Cup reaching its final stages we can use the idea of this sporting event in our spiritual lives. In sport the team members must have the right: 1. Mentality (vv. 25 - 26) – Jesus tells us that we must be coach-able and we can be by being childlike – coming to Jesus as ones who are unlearned, empty and trusting rather than filled with pride, arrogance and know-it- all attitude. A right coach-able learning attitude means we can improve, get better and fulfil our potential. This applies to football as well as our spiritual lives. Such an attitude towards our Heavenly Coach is right because it means God is praised (v. 25a), it is God's chosen path (v. 25b) and it brings pleasure to God (v. 26). 2. Model (v. 27) – God has chosen a process of modelling in order to reveal God's-self and what God wants. The process in verse 27 is that the Father has revealed all to His Son Jesus. The Son then chooses to whom He reveals His Father in Heaven. For a footballer to succeed, the right coaching model of what, when and how should be followed in order to succeed. Spiritually speaking our Heavenly Coach's model of revelation is right and we should follow it by responding correctly to the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ in order to see, know and experience God in the games we call life. 3. Method (vv. 28 - 30) – Shift the excess weight in order to be competitive. This is what good coaching method does for footballers, it gets them in great shape to compete and this is what our Heavenly Coach offers us. Do you want to know his coaching method? **Come (v. 28)** – This will lead to moving from restlessness to rest. Footballers have to rest well in order to perform at their best and we have to know true rest to compete well in life. This true rest is found in our Heavenly Coach, the Lord Jesus. **Take (v. 29a)** - Share the burden of life with Christ. The picture is of 2 oxen harnessed/yoked together but one oxen is bigger and stronger and bears most of the burden ... this is what our Heavenly Coach does for us. His yoke is so much lighter than carrying the burdens of life by ourselves. **Learn (v. 29b)** – Jesus is very gentle with us and humble as a teacher as our Heavenly coach leading to us knowing peace and experiencing a 'lightness' in our lives.

A good coach liberates a footballer into a freedom of expression and this is what our Heavenly Coach offers us as well because of the peace and lightness He brings through His training methods. Today, be surprised and sign up for the team just as Luke is going to do at his baptism. The team captain might not be what you expected but be assured he is the Son of God.

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