

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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SURETY AND GROWTH

12th January 2014

Minister's note: this is what was preached at Laggan, however I awarded it a "could do better" and this is not what people heard in St. Bride's!

Matthew 3:1-17

1 Corinthians 13:8-13

If you want to really annoy a teenage girl, tell her that she is just like her mother. There may be exceptions to this rule, but especially at that stage of life, most girls don't want to hear that. They know in themselves, know beyond a shadow of doubt, that they are so much more, so much better than their mothers, and they know that as they grow they will only get better and more wonderful while their mothers, well... I was like that. I appeal to the ladies – weren't you? (Later in life it may even become a compliment to tell a woman that they are like their mothers, but that is because we learn to see things differently as we grow.) Your teenage girl – or boy, likely but I was never a boy so can't speak from experience - is feeling very unsure of herself, and so she likes to try to have people think that in fact she is extremely confident, that she knows exactly what she is doing and where she is going. As if.

Reading today about John the Baptist and Jesus' baptism, I see that there are a lot of definite people in the story, and when I find people being definite, sometimes I wonder. The first person to be definite is not a character in the story at all, but the story-teller. Matthew is quite definite about John the Baptist being the one referred to Isaiah. "In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness...This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke..." He doesn't say that John was like that one, or he might have been that one, he says he is that one. We are not to question this. Matthew, after all, is not writing as things happen. He is not writing a diary or a blog of events. He is writing a considered literary account of things long afterwards, when he has had time to reflect deeply about things. The conclusion he has come to is that Jesus came as the one who fulfilled the Messianic prophecies, and one of these prophecies was of a fore-runner, and that this role was obviously filled by John. This is good. We want our Bible writers to be sure of what they want to tell us. Matthew wants to tell us about Jesus coming to fulfil prophecy.

The next definite person is John the Baptist. It can't have been easy growing up as John, having your parents telling you and probably everyone else the stories around your birth – how your father was dumb for the time of your gestation. How an angel had already predicted what you would do and be. You are to be the fore-runner of the Messiah – but how do you do that? What do you do? When I was growing up I had a poster on my wall which said this "Move boldly, for there is a hand above that will guide you." And that is what John does. He moves boldly.

John fulfils his role by placing himself fair and square in the tradition of the prophets. He seems quite definite about what people have to do - repent, and show it by bearing fruit worthy of repentance, etc. Prophets have often said "repent" and have often stood up to authority figures, warning them for their own good. We saw that in our services last autumn. John is saying nothing new, but he is bold and he is clear, and he does not mince his words even for those who could make life difficult for him. Luke, who wrote for a gentile audience, cites him standing up to Roman soldiers and telling them how they should behave. Matthew, who writes for Jews, shows him standing up to the religious leaders, and being less than reverential about even the blood-line, the national blood line which went back to Abraham. He demands repentance and adapts the ritual whereby a gentile might take on the Jewish faith to be a ritual for all to show their need for forgiveness and their determination to turn around. He baptises.

John is sure he knows what he is doing, and he seems to be doing a pretty good job, but his understanding does not include Jesus being baptised. When Jesus turns up at the river to be baptised, John would have stopped him. Suddenly we see that John does not really know what he is doing, or maybe we see that what he is doing is more than he understands. You see there is no template for Jesus in prophetic sources, not even though he came to fulfil many prophecies. John knows that Jesus has come to be Messiah, and there a fair number of prophecies which had been attached to the idea of the Messiah, but none of them squared with him needing to be baptised. The prophecies were not a template, they were a very partial picture.

We may see a resemblance to the parents in a child, but that does not mean that the child will grow up to be his father or her mother. There is more to a person than straightforward genetic inheritance. That is one of the wonders and mysteries of being human. John probably knew Jesus quite well as a person – they were family and they were very close in age. John also knew the Messianic prophecies. But he didn't know Jesus as Messiah: he didn't know how Jesus was going to be Messiah with the personality he had and the understanding he had. To take the prophecies alone as a template of who Jesus was, was like seeing a few pieces from a jigsaw puzzle of the Mona Lisa and acknowledging their quality. You can see they are very fine, but they do not give you a full picture.

The prophecies tell us about Jesus' place of birth, about his death, about him being a suffering servant, about him being a prince of peace..... But they are not a template. Jesus still surprises. He surprises John, who at this stage knew most about him. Because Jesus is sure he should be baptised.

Jesus is the final person who is sure in this story. He is quite sure that he should be baptised, that he has to fulfil all righteousness - do everything that is right. John knows that Jesus has never done wrong. He knows that his cousin keeps God's law more perfectly than anyone ever has, so he has no need to repent, to turn from a sinful way of life to a new attempt to live God's way. "I need to be baptised by you" he protests. For John the more righteous person is the one who should administer baptism. But Jesus doesn't see it like that. He doesn't see baptism as something done by the more righteous for the less righteous (thanks be to God, or which minister would ever dare administer it?). He doesn't see the need for it as an admission of failure. For Jesus baptism is an admission of humanity, it is a positive thing, it shows that he wants to follow God, shows it in public, and this is the right thing to do. "It is proper in this way to fulfil all righteousness" he says. Jesus, you see, has not come to John as a sinless person simply by avoiding doing wrong. Life, for Jesus, is about being proactive in doing right.

So it should be for Jesus followers. Christians are not people who just avoid doing wrong: they are people who look always for the right thing, the loving and helpful thing to do.

One of the things that becomes clear to many of us Christmas by Christmas, is how much we are conditioned to imagine and interpret the Christmas story in certain ways. At our little Scripture Union group, just before Christmas Alan Myles the local schools worker visited and gave the children a multiple choice Christmas quiz about what the Bible says. How many wise men were there – three, seven or twenty? How many cross innkeepers were there: one two or four? And so on. The children, pretty soon worked out that the right answer would be “none of the above”. Then they were caught by answering “none of the above” to the question: Which animals appear in the Christmas story: ox, ass, pigeon?” Because the pigeon does appear, when Jesus is dedicated in the temple. We are conditioned by nativity plays and Christmas cards to imagine things in a certain way. We are conditioned by what we have learned in the past to think we understand all about it, and find it hard to hear the story afresh and find new truths in it.

And what is true for the Christmas story is just as true for the rest of the story of Jesus. If familiarity doesn't exactly breed contempt, it can certainly deaden our expectations. Paul was talking about God's love, when he said that “Now we see as in a mirror, dimly” – thinking of the mirrors of polished metal which were what people in those days had, if they had one at all - “but then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall know fully..” He is talking of God's love and God's love found human expression in Jesus, so he is also talking about Jesus.

We do not see him fully and clearly. Our eyes are clouded by the imperfections of the mirror. Our understanding is clouded by our own expectations or desires. Artists who have painted Jesus as blond and blue-eyed have been showing us this in paint, whether they meant to or not. They have painted Jesus as their own cultural ideal of human masculine beauty. It is so hard not to do this. And it is not the worst thing we can do, to show Jesus in terms of our own culture, to show that he is relevant to us as well as to his own time and people.

Matthew was sure about John, and he was right. John seemed sure about himself and about Jesus, and he was right too – but what he was right about was not the whole truth. We human being love things to be definite and sure – that is why certain branches of Christianity are thriving. And there is much that we can be sure about: that Jesus shows us God's love which is the greatest thing in the world and endures all things is just one of them. There are many things we can be sure about – that God forgives us when we repent; and that God can use us even before we are perfect.

There is a lot to be said for being sure and being definite. People who are sure are the very ones who can move boldly, and get things done. We should be sure of our faith, of our Saviour, sure of Jesus, and sure of ourselves as his children and servants.

It is good to be certain and sure of our faith. And it is good that we should move boldly, putting what we know to be true into practice. Like John we can do that, because there is a hand above that will guide us when we need to know more and see more – Just as Jesus came to John and showed him more than he knew.

We can be sure of our faith, but in our certainties, let us never think that we know it all. Let us never think that we have all truth and our way is the only right one: that was a fault into which some of our forefathers fell.

As one of the great divines said “If you think you understand, it isn't God”. So as we read and think about and follow Jesus, let us be open for new learning and new experiences and new challenges. Your teenager doesn't want to be told they resemble their parents, and they will turn out to be different and be themselves. But Jesus was the image of the invisible God and he turned out to show us God, in all his unknowableness, doing and saying things so incomprehensible and counter-intuitive that still we find them hard to accept today. Let us praise God that there is always more to discover of him and his ways and his purpose. “Now we see in a mirror, dimly, then we shall see face to face.” And let us vow to follow after Jesus wherever he leads.

I would like us to end this sermon by reminding ourselves of some of the things that the church has been sure about and remains sure of, even though they are real to us in different ways at different times. So let us say the Apostles' Creed together (Hymn Book 628).

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