

Who Are You?

A sermon on John 1:6-8, 15-28 by Nathan Nettleton, 8 December 2019

© LaughingBird.net

Message

The imminent arrival of God's messiah asks each of us to take up the identity of witnesses who open the way for God to be known.

Sermon

Many of us, when asked who we are, will answer by identifying ourselves with our work. "Tell me about yourself." "Well, I'm Julie, and I'm a chemical engineer." Whether your main job is paid or unpaid, it probably occupies much of your time and attention, and so naturally it becomes a central part of your identity.

Julian Assange has been in the news again this week, and much of the conversation is about a work related question of identity. Who is Julian Assange? Is he a journalist who was just doing what journalists are supposed to do by bringing the truth to public attention, or is he an espionage agent who was illegally exposing sensitive information and putting lives at risk? Who is he?

In our gospel reading tonight, we heard this question being put to John the baptiser. "Who are you?" The question is put to him by a delegation of religious experts sent by the religious authorities in Jerusalem. They want to know who he is and what he thinks he's doing. It's probably not surprising. As far as we can tell, this baptism thing that John was doing was somewhat unprecedented, and the closest thing to it in Judaism of that time was only for gentile people who were converting to Judaism. So when John started baptising people who were already Jewish, and it became suddenly all the rage, the religious authorities were going to want to know who he was and what he thought he was doing.

John is quite clear about who he is not. He's not the messiah, he's not Elijah, and he's not "the prophet". Based on verses from the Hebrew Bible, many people in those times expected that either Elijah or "a prophet like Moses" would appear in the lead up to the appearance of the messiah or the great and terrible day of the Lord. So when a strange new prophet like John appeared doing strange new things, these were the identities that people would inevitably begin to throw around. But John is clear that he is not one of them.

"Well if you are not one of them," they ask, "why are you baptising people?" And in particular, why are you baptising good Jewish people? Who are you?

Now the other John, the one who wrote this gospel account, has already told us who he thinks John the baptiser is. As we heard at the beginning of the reading, he says that John is a man sent from God as a witness to testify to the light, to Jesus the messiah, so that people might believe through him.

John the baptiser himself agrees that this is who he is. When the religious delegation press him about who he is, he answers with a quote from the prophet Isaiah, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" So he is testifying to one who is to come, and he is clearing the path for the arrival of that one.

I was listening to a radio interview yesterday with the cave diving anaesthetist who helped get those boys out of the cave in Thailand last year, and he was telling the story of being desperate to get off the mountain to get some sleep after the exhausting first day of rescues, and being told that there was no way to get off because the Thai prime minister was on his way up the mountain on the only road with a full prime-ministerial cavalcade. So he figured that the only thing that gets priority over a prime-ministerial cavalcade is an ambulance with its lights and sirens blaring, so he and his colleague commandeered an ambulance and made a successful get away.

When John the baptiser says that his mission is to be the voice crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' it's a bit like the lights and sirens on that ambulance. I live just down the road from the Royal Melbourne Hospital, so ambulances go past my house with lights and sirens on about every 15 minutes, and I have plenty of chance to see how their approach screams 'prepare the way' and all the other vehicles squish over to the sides to clear a path for the ambulance to get through.

That's John's message. There's an emergency here. Wake up to yourselves. Turn things around. Get out of the way and start being part of the solution instead of part of the problem. Change is coming, and you'll want to be on the right side of it when it does.

So John's message is clear and strong, but he's not pretending to be anything more than the lights and siren. The one who will be the heart of the change is still to come. As we heard John say in tonight's reading, "The one who comes after me ranks ahead of me," and "I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals."

So John's answer to the 'Who are you?' question is not one that big notes himself. I'm the light's and siren, the messenger, the voice in the wilderness. He is defining his own identity in relation to another, to Jesus the messiah. Jesus is the one who is really going to turn things around, he says, but I have been given a part to play in that. I am who I am in relation to that.

In today's world of overblown self-actualisation programs and identity politics, there are many who would despise John's answer as evidence of a failure to forge his own identity, independent of others. But that's largely a delusion. We are always and unavoidably defining ourselves in relation to others. Most of the contemporary discussion about identity politics is simply tribal. Will you identify yourself with this tribe or that tribe? And most of the major turning points in our lives, the times of really deep change, come when observing the behaviour of another inspires some serious reconsideration of our own behaviour. Our individual identity is actually not so individual. It is comprised of a network of relationships.

A few years ago, I attended a liturgy in which one of my best mates and a former associate pastor of this church, Garry Deverell, was accepted into the membership of the Anglican church. Yesterday afternoon, I attended a liturgy in which another of my best mates and his wife, formerly Anglicans, were baptised and confirmed into the membership of the Antiochian Orthodox Church. In such events I always feel like I am being asked the question, "Who are you?"

And it is precisely because that question is always about who you are related to. Who am I? Who am I in relation to these different traditions of the Christian church? The way I craft

liturgy actually looks much more familiar to the congregation of the Antiochian Orthodox Church than it does to the majority of Australian Baptists, so who am I in relation to this very ancient stream of the Christian tradition? If Phil is doing this, should I be doing this?

I don't think there is any danger at all of me becoming a member of the Antiochian Orthodox Church, and even less the Anglican Church. But I don't resent facing the questions. These kind of identity questions are perfectly healthy and quite good for us. One of the main reasons that I feel so sure that I am a Baptist to my bootstraps is that I have spent a lot of time pondering the question of why I am not Anglican or Roman Catholic or Orthodox.

But of course, this denominational identity thing is small potatoes. Many of you are here, not because you strongly identify with the Baptist tradition, but simply because in this one random congregation you have found meaningful community and valuable support for your journey into the life of God. And that's perfectly okay. Denominational identities are small potatoes for most of us, and so they should be.

The real question for each of us, as it was for John the baptiser, is who are we in relation to Jesus the messiah whose time is at hand, drawing ever nearer. In some ways, this is a bit like that question that used to be used in wartime propaganda: "Daddy, what did you do during the war?" I saw an opinion piece by a woman who said that she joined Extinction Rebellion after she imagined herself being asked by her children or grandchildren in twenty years time, "What did you do in the struggle to halt global warming?"

So perhaps the 'Who are you?' question to each of us could be "What did you do" or "What part are you playing in relation to the emerging culture of Jesus the messiah?" How are you related to him and to what he is doing? Who are you?

In answering that question, the fact that we are followers of Jesus might suggest that we look to Jesus and seek to model our identity on his, and to a large extent, that is exactly right. Compared to John, we stand on the other side of Jesus's life and ministry, and we can and should seek to follow in his footsteps and live out his values and his mission. There's no question that that is right. But there is a danger in it that calls for a little caution.

The danger was unfortunately demonstrated at the most recent Baptist Union assembly when a new draft vision statement was unveiled that suggested that we are "to be a union of flourishing churches with Christlike followers, that *redeems society* and brings transformation to Victoria." Now I absolutely agree that we are to participate with Jesus in his work of redeeming society, but if we think that it is our job as a union of church to redeem society, we have tripped ourselves up and positioned ourselves wrongly in relation to Jesus. The task of redeeming society is the work of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, not the responsibility of the Baptist Union of Victoria.

Our job is, like that of John the baptiser, to be the lights and siren, to be the voice in the wilderness clearing the way for the work of redemption that Jesus is coming to complete. So in fact, for both us as a church and each of us as individuals, we might be on safer ground thinking of modelling our identities on that on John. Not by ignoring Jesus in favour of John, but by identifying ourselves by the particular way that we are related to Jesus and to his work in the world.

Many of us cringe uncomfortably at talk about being a witness testifying to Jesus, because we have encountered so many examples of that being done in obnoxious and totally cringe-worthy ways. We've run into beady eyed personal evangelists who seem to see everyone as a target and whose words often seem to bear no relation at all to the integrity of their lives. But note this about John. Although he identifies himself as "the voice in the wilderness", what draws people to his voice firstly is what he is doing, not just what he is saying. His testimony to Jesus is given in response to people who come asking 'Who are you and what are you on about?' in response to his growing reputation as someone who walks the walk with God.

That too is our calling. Not to ram an unwanted and unwelcome message down people's throats, but to live lives of such radical love and mercy that people begin to ask, "Who are you? What are you on about? What's going on here?", and to be ready and willing to answer those questions with openness and integrity and humility.

In this Advent season, we are reminded that we are not the big game. Jesus and his approaching kingdom or emerging culture is the big game, the big answer to the myriad of crises that our world finds itself drowning in. Our identity is not found in being the answer, but in bearing witness to the answer that has already emerged, and clearing the way for that answer to roll on in, take root and transform our world and our lives. And the ultimate meaning of our lives will be found, not in trying to be the big something, but in finding our God-given identity in relation to that answer, in relation to Jesus who is coming to make all things new.

That's who you were created to be, who you are called to be, but it's up to you to grasp it and live it. So I leave you with the question: Who are you?