

Advent 4

John 1.19-28

“Then said they unto him, Who art thou? that we may give an answer unto them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself?”

In the name ...

Contemporary secular culture says that you can create your own identity; that you can be whoever you want to be (if only you try hard enough). It says that there are no pre-determined – no “God-given” – callings, vocations – what people used to call ‘stations’ – to which men and women belong. It is a culture that rejects inherited structures and institutions – religious communities; marriage and family life; monarchy; the respective roles of teacher and pupil; the traditional understanding of holy orders. It holds these to be oppressive and contrary to human dignity; as preventing people from being what they want or need to be.

The question “who art thou” has become “who do you want to be?”. Personal identity has become as much a question of choice as the sort of house one wishes to live in, the type of car one wants to drive, or the style of clothes one chooses to wear. The consumer revolution seems to have combined with a view of the world that has no overall story – no meta-narrative – so that our very identity, who each of us is as a person, has become just another choice. We want to construct identities for ourselves, to invent and assert ourselves rather than just to *be* ourselves.

In Alan Bennet’s play, *The Madness of George III*, the king, by now quite ill, is introduced to a Dr Willis. Willis is a clergyman

turned doctor who has a proven track-record of helping his patient's to recover from mental illness. He explains his methods: his patients "till the soil, cultivate... and in so doing, they acquire a better conceit of themselves." The King isn't having any of this: "I'm king of England. A man can have no better conceit of himself." The trouble is, it is living up to the conceit of being a king that is preventing George III from recovering. It is beneath his dignity to accept help from a man like Dr Willis. And more than that, being the king prevents him – protects him – from developing true self-knowledge. He lives under a constructed identity.

It is only after he has collapsed into real madness, has lost any sense of kingly dignity, that self-knowledge comes. Towards the end of the play, the king begins to recover; and members of the court recognise his recovery. "Your majesty seems more yourself," says a courtier. "Yeah, I've always been myself, even when I was ill," says the king, "Only now I seem myself." He recognises that when he was mad and raving, enduring indignity after indignity, he remained himself. Even though the trappings of kingship had, perforce, been cast aside – along with everything that went to construct an identity for him and present it to the world – even then, he was himself.

"Who art thou?", ask the priests and Levites of John the Baptist. Who do you think you are? Who are you trying to be? What identity have you constructed for yourself? What category of religious personality do you fit into? An interrogation – almost a trial – ensues, with the Baptist's three emphatic, and increasingly terse, denials. "I am not the Messiah", he says, without any equivocation. So you must be taking on another identity then – what is it? Are you Elijah – the prophet who did not die but went up to heaven in a fiery chariot and who will return before the Day of the Lord? "I am not." OK then, are you a prophet like Moses, a prophet who would solve legal

problems the way Moses did? “No.” Well we’ve got to give some answer to the authorities in Jerusalem who sent us. What do you say about yourself?

But the Baptist will not answer the question, “What sayest thou of thyself”. He will not say anything about himself – he will not adopt any sort of identity for himself. All he is, is a voice: “the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord”: not his own words but a quotation from the scriptures – from Isaiah. This is his answer. Who he is – his true self – has meaning only in terms of his relationship with one “whose shoe’s latchet [he is] not worthy to unloose”. As St Augustine points out, poetically, in one of his sermons, the Baptist is a voice for a little while; Christ is the Word in the beginning and for all eternity. The Baptist, in rejecting the temptation to make himself the centre of attention, receives his self-understanding entirely from Christ. He understands that who he – the Baptist – is receives meaning not from any role played by him, but only from his relationship with the Son of God come into the world.

The quotation about a voice crying in the wilderness comes from the passage in Isaiah which is our Old Testament reading at today’s mass. It originally referred to the role of the angels in preparing a highway through the desert so that Israel could return home from captivity in Babylon. Like a bulldozer, the angels were to level hills and fill-in the valleys to prepare a superhighway. But John the Baptist’s role is not to prepare a way for God’s people to return to the promised land, but to prepare the way for God to come to his people. That is the direction of travel. As John Donne put it in one of his sermons, *“Immanuel is God with us; it is not we with God: God seeks us, comes to us, before we to him.”* John’s baptizing and preaching in the desert was directed to opening up the hearts of men, levelling their pride and the other obstacles, filling in their

empty places, and so preparing them for God's intervention in their lives.

“O Lord, raise up ... thy power, and come among us, and with great might succour us,” we have prayed. “*Thy power*”: the source of power is not in ourselves, but in God; God who seeks us and comes to us, who comes among us. We cannot construct our own identities as Christian people; in fact we need to deconstruct the identities we have made for ourselves – the assertion of ourselves – by which we are “sore let and hindered”. We need to lose our inclination to assert ourselves, make ourselves the centre of attention. Unless we do that, we will be in the same boat as the Pharisees of whom the Baptist said, “there standeth one among you, whom ye know not.”

Here in the mass where God comes to us, seeks us, we allow him to be the centre of our attention. When the priest shows us the host he uses the words of John the Baptist: “Behold the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” Those words are a repeated call to conversion, a call made to us, in the presence of the Lord, to turn around and move in a new direction, towards him.

In Advent, the Lord is at hand: his arrival has begun. At Christmas we will celebrate God with us; God coming among us – as one of us. The liturgy of the mass is the highway through the desert by which God continues to come to us. When we come to Christmas – and when we come to each mass – let us be prepared: let our hearts be open, our pride and conceit levelled, our self-constructed identities left behind, so that we are ready to make room for God and to be changed – so that the glory of the Lord may be revealed to us and in us.