

3: Recognising God among us

When God comes how will we know? How do we recognise the presence of God in our world?

We have just listened to part of the Prologue to John's Gospel. Some of us will hear the whole of it on Christmas morning. The parts we heard concern John the Baptist. The evangelists tell us, repeats and, less we missed it the first two times, says it a third time: John was not the light. Are you hearing me? John was not the light. Jesus was the light who had come into the world. Jesus, NOT JOHN!

For the evangelist to stress so emphatically, even interrupting the flow of a marvellous poem, tells us with complete certainty that there were some people in John's audience who thought the the Baptist was the light; and they are repeating this belief which the evangelist wants to silence.

The Baptist had a huge following. It was the crowds that John attracted that led to his arrest and death at the hands of the tyrant prince, Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee and areas across the Jordan where John carried out his watery ministry. Despots dislike crowds and charismatic leaders who have multitudes on their side. Antipas did what many other fearful figures of fragile power have done down the ages. He removed a threat with speed and finality. No doubt most who went out to the desert to hear John returned home, sadder and wiser; but some kept the memory of John alive. We meet disciples of John in the Acts of the Apostles; and they continue as a small group down the centuries.

We can admire their tenacity and their sincerity, even though we feel they were in error. Jesus is the light and John a most importance witness to the light. But how were they to know? How does anyone know that Jesus is the Lord of Life, the Light of the world? John came first. John's voice was the first prophetic voice to be heard in the Land for five hundred years. John broke the silence. John baptised Jesus who came from faraway Galilee summoned by John's voice. The mistake of John's disciples was easily made.

John was not Jesus' only competitor in the first century in Palestine. As he predicted many appeared saying "I am he". There was 'the Egyptian', there was a rebel named Theudas, and others. And in the second century the second Jewish revolt was led by Bar Kochba, 'the Star', and Rabbi Akiva announced he was the long awaited Messiah. Mistakes are inevitable. How do we recognise Jesus when he is among us?

Leo Tolstoy perhaps gave us the most famous illustration of the recognition, or the failure to perceive, God in our midst. In a story called “*Where love is, God is*”, he retells an ancient tale about a man called Martin in his story who dreams that Jesus is to visit him the next day. In the course of that day he welcomes various poor people into his home but Jesus never appears. Eventually he realises, with the help of the parable of the sheep and the goats that we heard a few weeks ago that Jesus had indeed visited him many times, and had found a warm and ready welcome.

So an answer to our question is we see Christ in everyone. When we serve the needy we are serving Christ. The stranger is to be treated as *Christus Ignotus*, an unknown Christ.

It is easy to see the face of Christ in the loveable, the friendly, those who bear no threat and who will be grateful for our help. Can we see Christ among us in the awkward, the difficult, those who are a pain, and who will not be grateful for what we do for them.

Victor Hugo, another great novelist of the 19th century, explored this issue in the early pages of “*Les Miserables*”. Jean Valjean has gained his release from hard labour for the crime of stealing bread. He receives food and lodging from a Bishop from whom he steals silver candlesticks. He is arrested and taken back to the Bishop for the stolen goods to be identified before Valjean is returned to gaol. The Bishop expresses surprise. Yes they are indeed his; but Valjean is no thief. Indeed he had not taken all that the Bishop had wanted to give him. He is given more silverware and his freedom. He becomes a factory owner and the town's Mayor. The good bishop saw hope in a hopeless case; and Valjean became a blessing to many. Though not to his enemy and would-be nemesis, Inspector Javer. Javer pursues Valjean with evangelic zeal, ultimately to his own destruction.

Valjean is the hero and we applaud the holy cleric. But do we see the face of Christ in the unlovely Javer. Surely it is there too, no matter how well disguised.

In the musical of the novel we hear Valjean sing, “*To love another person is to see the face of God.*” Love your enemies is the heart of the new Law of Christ. Love is the key to seeing Christ in our world.