

Advent 3 Chester Cathedral

Jn 1: 6-8, 19-28; Is 61: 1-4, 8-11

Does Adam have a voice? Those of you watching the entirely wonderful TV comedy 'Rev' will know which Adam I mean. The Revd Adam Smallbone, fictional vicar of St Saviour's in the Marsh, trying to make the voice of faith heard in a success and money – driven society, wedded to individualism and indifferent to religion. Adam's struggles are very funny and poignant and make some telling comments on life in Britain today.

Adam is endearingly aware of his own short-comings, his all too human emotions and anxieties; in a recent episode he is insecure and worried about his role at the local C of E primary school. Adam is very jealous of an attractive male science teacher but cloaks this by expressing anxieties about the teacher's atheism. With an inspection looming the female head- clearly very sweet on the science teacher- rates Adam's assemblies very low- she accuses him of not engaging with the children. But in a tragic turn of events the science teacher is killed in a road traffic accident, and Adam takes the school assembly in a way which brings a lump to the throat, finding an authentic voice to talk to the children about the hope and reality of resurrection.

'I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness.' So John the Baptist strides onto the stage. 'There was a man sent from God'. That is all St John tells us- forget all the things we learn from the other evangelists. A man sent from God- a voice in the wilderness. But John the Baptist knows who he is, knows his purpose in life. It is not a question of humility, nor of pride; but of self-knowledge and assurance about who he is, what he is- and what he is not. Self-knowledge is always hard won and a sign of maturity- knowing who

we are, what we can do and what we can't. John the Baptist had to go into the wilderness to acquire such grounding in himself- to hear the voice of God and to be the voice.

How do we recognise the authentic voice- in ourselves and in others? We live in a world where there is too much noise and a cacophony of voices. Which ones do we listen to- which do we ignore? Part of the answer to that is about seeking the silence in which we can hear the voice of God- God longing for his voice to penetrate the noise and confusion and conflicting messages our lives are filled with. Hearing God's voice in this way enables us to discriminate between the multitude of voices in our world today. We are bombarded with opinions about the crisis in the Eurozone; about the economic situation in our own country, about the threats posed by climate change. Politicians vie with each other to get their voices heard and what we so often hear loudest are the voices of those crying in prosperity- those having no wilderness knowledge themselves.

So many voices- but what about those who have no voice- the voiceless in our world? This week Reading the Riots was published- a research study into the causes of the riots in August. In a newspaper article this week the Archbishop of Canterbury wrote of the likelihood of the riots happening again because of alienation and massive economic hopelessness. Inequality is rising faster in Great Britain than in any other rich nation in the world. That is both shameful and dangerous- it is dangerous when people feel they have no voice, no stake in society- it almost inevitably leads to destructive and anti-social behaviour. The Archbishop wrote: 'we have to find the energy and hope to rescue those who think they have nothing to lose.'

Some voices are trying to be heard. The Occupy movement is one such example. They are trying to put onto the public agenda questions about the way we live-about ethics and finance- whether continual growth can be sustainable, let alone desirable? What alternatives might there be? We need a huge change of direction- to challenge the assumptions of capitalism, the divide between rich and poor. For the sake of our common humanity- and for the sake of our damaged environment and threatened world- we must listen to different voices. These voices must be heard. It can no longer be about entitlement but about the re-discovery of deeper satisfactions in life, which are nothing to do with money.

These voices-Occupy and others-deserve our support – it is too easy to point to shortcomings or disruptive fringes as an excuse not to engage, but they are voices which should be listened to and they need to know that they are being heard. God’s voice is heard so often not among the rich and the powerful but in the least expected places and among those on the margins.

So what about our voice? We also have a voice-to speak the Word of God and to be, if necessary, like John the Baptist, voices in the wilderness. I spoke earlier of the need for self-knowledge, understanding who we are. Knowing both the importance and the limits of our common calling, as John certainly did, won’t bring status or security, won’t necessarily earn us any favours- but we will know who we are- God’s beloved messengers. A deep rooting in prayer- in our relationship with God- keeps us authentic. One of the remarkable aspects of the ‘Rev’ comedy is Adam’s prayer- natural intimate conversations with God- honest, very human, seeking help. Our prayer underpins everything else. Prayer can- does- change the world because it is where we find our authentic voice. The silence of prayer leads, paradoxically to the imperative

not to keep silent- being silent in the face of the injustice of the world is not an option.

And the message? Well, there is so much to be pessimistic about. But don’t let us ever fall into the trap of thinking there is nothing we can do- that nothing will ever change. That is a deeply irreligious attitude. The novelist William Golding described himself as ‘a universal pessimist but a cosmic optimist.’ I take that to mean that we should have a larger, longer view- our eyes trained not on what is just in front of us, but on the wide horizon of God’s creative love and will, which will provide the energy and hope to do the good that can be done now, the courage to voice the words of those who have been silenced.

We have heard the voice of God this morning in those inspiring words from the prophet Isaiah- words full of joy and hope. It is good news for the oppressed, the broken-hearted, the prisoners, those who mourn. God who loves justice and hates wrongdoing will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

That is the good news- let it soak deep inside us so that we can offer our support and encouragement where we recognise other authentic voices and be prepared to challenge those voices which bring division and despair where there should be joy and hope.

Adam’s voice, amid the noise of the world, *is* an authentic voice of faith. What about the Church? What about us?

© Christine Bull2011