

Bishop's Reflection – 3rd Sunday of Advent

“Who are you?” and “Who do you think you are?” The questions are interchangeable in today’s Gospel. The religious authorities are not happy. As far as they are concerned, the people are so easily swayed.

John’s answer is equally puzzling. He answers the authorities in the negative. I do not do this on my own authority, “I am not the Messiah.” And, to every other question, he answers, “I am not.” When pressed for an answer he simply answers, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness.” For those who remember last week’s First Reading, that passage begins, “Comfort, O Comfort my people, says your God...” “...For they have paid double for their sins.”

“Who are you?” The question may well be asked of you today. Many people are busy answering the question in many different ways. They tidy up their Facebook profile, they doctor up their resumes, they put their best foot forward. But, before you go too far, and give a false impression of who you are, take a moment to learn from John the Baptist’s answer, he who was careful not to pretend to be someone he was not, and had a very realistic way of viewing himself.

And what do these words mean, “I am not the Messiah.” As Bishop it means that I don’t pretend to be God’s answer to every single problem and issue and realize my gifts and limitations in serving God’s people. As a mother or father, it may mean recognizing one’s own strengths and weaknesses and coming to terms that you cannot make your children happy at all times. As children, it may mean questioning your attitude of “knowing better”, that your generation is somehow superior to those who came before. “I am not the Messiah” is not an admittance of defeat, but an acknowledgement of our limits and our hope in the one who alone must occupy that place.

But that isn’t the only thing we can learn from John. When pressed for an answer, for those who sent them, John answers, in the words of Isaiah, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, “Make straight the way of the Lord.”” In response, we might ask ourselves, “How are we like a voice of one crying out in the wilderness?” “How are we called to be God’s comfort... God’s light to the world?” It might not be through calling people to repentance or baptizing them in the Jordan River, but it will involve some form of Christian witness.

Kindness, forgiveness, faithfulness, generosity, compassion, service and self sacrifice, these are only a few of the things we are called to live. The actual deeds and way of life may be different, but the seeds of hope that we sow is the same. “I baptize you with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me, I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” Our deeds and lives may pale in comparison to His, yet, in their essence, they are still the same.

Maybe that is why it is essential, not only to know who you are, but whose you are. Who is the One to whom you belong? Though people may come and question, friends, neighbours, classmates, co-workers and strangers, and even want to dictate what they want you to do and be, knowledge of self, God and the key relationship that underpins our lives, helps us to stay directed and focused on what brings hope to the world.