



BELLVILLE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

A Congregation of the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa

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ADVENT 3 – Recognizing Christ

John 1

~ Brent Russell ~

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READING:

JOHN 1

- The first Sunday in Advent is a **focus on the prophets** who told us that God's anointed one would come
- The second Sunday is **about God's word** – Christ himself and the word of God the Bible – the witness to Christ
- The third Sunday in advent is the time when we **centre on John the Baptist**
- **"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness"**
- Today is all about **recognizing Jesus**
- **John's Gospel chapter 1 talks about the world failing to see Jesus for who He was and is**
- **The light came into the darkness but the darkness failed to understand it (John 1:5)**
- **Though the world was made through Him they failed to recognize Him (John 1:10)**
- **He came to his own but they failed to receive Him (John 1:11)**
- **John the Baptist testifies to the priests and Levites that there is one amongst them who they do not know (John 1:26)**
- **John the Baptist told people that he himself would not have recognized Jesus (John 1:33) unless God had revealed him to John**
- **I have often wondered whether I would recognize Jesus if he comes**
- Clearly the scriptures tell us that we will know because he will come again in **power and Glory** and it would be hard to miss
- But **if Jesus should choose to come again in a similar way** to his first coming would I recognize Him?

- What always frightens me the most is that **those who do not recognize Jesus in the Bible are the ministers**
- It is the **men of God**, the **priests**, the **educated** ones, the ones who do God's work who miss Him entirely
- Those who **SHOULD** recognize him before others are the ones who **FAIL** to recognize Jesus at all
- I guess that I have this fear that somehow I might help others to see Jesus but I may miss him myself
- As Paul writes in **1 Corinthians 9:27** *No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.*
- **And it is a challenge for us all to preach Christ, but to not get so caught up in the things of Christ that we miss Him entirely**
- **Christmas is one of those seasons where many people across the world fail to recognize Jesus at all**
- He is so **deeply obscured** in our celebration of this time that he is **almost impossible to find**
- As much as he is the reason for the season and has given his name to it **most people have missed him entirely**
- Rod mentioned at thanksgiving most **children in the UK** recognize the word Jesus only as a swear word
- At Christmas perhaps more than ever we have **wrapped the message of Jesus** in all the pretty paper, bright lights and rotund men in red suits
- **Perhaps so much so that we have made it almost impossible to recognize Jesus or to come to Jesus at all**
- **I've gotta confess that I am not much of a fan of Christmas at all**
- **I find it hard to deal with the constant advertising and pushing of material things**
- I struggle to put up with the **flashing lights** and **garish colours** of the season
- But perhaps what I find hardest of all to accept is the way that we as a largely Christian community in the Western Cape celebrate Christmas
- I look at all the noise and hullabaloo around the season and I simply wonder to myself "**Where is Jesus**"
- And so whilst I am trying very hard not to be the "**Grinch who stole Christmas**"
- **I am suggesting that we begin to celebrate Christmas a little more carefully and deliberately**
- **As I come to take my first steps into fatherhood this is becoming more and more a reality for me**
- **That I need to rethink Christmas**
- **I believe in many ways it really has become Xmas**
- A festive season and celebration where the **reason for the season** has been so pushed out of the picture that we fail to recognize Him at all

- And so perhaps we should change the name of Christmas to "**Festivus**" a word coined by the comedian Jerry Seinfeld
- **One of my colleagues was relating a Christmas play he had seen**
- And the story was that Mary and Joseph where **posing for a photograph** with baby Jesus
- And the photographer to add a bit of flair began to **add props** to the picture
- He put in some of the **animals** from the stall to add some character and texture
- Then added a couple of **wise men** for some colour and drama
- Of course the scene was **getting a little crowded so Joseph was asked to step aside**
- Of course the rough and simple **shepherds** had to be there
- And as more and more of these props where added there was less and less space for Mary and Jesus
- **And so as the photographer stood back and finally admired the final scene that he wanted to shoot**
- **Mary, Joseph and the infant Jesus had been pushed out of the picture entirely**
- **The message of John the Baptist was telling people to get real**
- The **simplicity of his lifestyle** was so that his message would not be obscured or hidden in any way
- He was a man **simple means**
- Dressed in camel hair garment , and ate **locusts and honey**
- He was not a man of great eloquence and fancy language
- But a man who **talked straight** – made his point simply and clearly and often very bluntly
- And I want us to do the same in this Christmas season
- **I want us to be like John with a simple and clear message of Jesus**
- **Not a message hidden by tradition, obscured by folklore or concealed by myth and legend**
- If we want the world to know Jesus in their midst the only way it's going to happen is if we bring His message to them **set free from all the rubbish** that we have tacked onto this festivity
- **Our Church letterhead reminds us that we must be Christ centred**
- **And so I want us like John to do nothing other at Christmas than point people to Jesus in every way possible**

LET'S GET PRACTICAL

- As a tool to help us make this a little more practical I want us to look at the passage out of Isaiah 61

READING:

ISAIAH 61:1-11

- You will **recognize the passage** because it is one that Jesus reads for himself in the **synagogue** in Luke chapter 4
- Jesus then declared that this **scripture had now been fulfilled** in their presence
- And as much as Christ came to **fulfil this prophecy of Isaiah**
- **So we too as followers of Jesus need to proclaim the same message**
- **So the question I believe we need to ask ourselves is "How do we change Christmas that others may see Jesus more clearly"**
- What can we do to bring back the **real message** of Christmas
- We need to help those around us our family, our friends and all those who do not know Jesus
- How do we point them to Jesus, how do we proclaim the good news to them as we are called to do as followers of Jesus

So I want to suggest that what we need to do is that we need to create new traditions around Christmas

- **Get rid of SOME of the old traditions, NOT ALL, that surround Christmas**
- **Get rid of SOME of the things, rituals and tradition around Christmas that obscure Jesus and that cover and hide His message**
- **We must keep Christmas a fun, exciting season of celebration – that is what it is**
- But let's do so in a way that **helps others recognize and to find Jesus**
- As John the Baptist revealed Jesus to those in Palestine 2000 years ago we must reveal Him to those around us now
- **We need to create new traditions and we need to create them based in part at least on the message in Isaiah 61**
- **The Christ message in Isaiah 61 outlines a number of groups of people to whom the good news in particular was to be revealed**
- **The poor, the broken-hearted, the captives and the prisoners**

POOR

- Jesus tells the disciples in Matthew 26 that the "***poor will always be with us***"
 - We will always have the **drunk folk** who will try to **guide your car** into a parking spot
 - Who **come to your door** at inopportune moments
 - Who will **knock at your window** at the traffic lights
 - **We know that it is not going to change in a hurry**
 - **But in line with revealing Christ to the world at Christmas I believe that we need to create new traditions that will free us from the greed of Christmas and will help us bless the poor**
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- BPC has for many years put together a **Christmas lunch for the night shelter**
 - It has **been a blessing** to people who are really down and out and in need of a practical demonstration of Jesus love for them
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- **So what are you and your children and grandchildren going to do this Christmas that will be good news to the poor?**
 - **What new tradition** are you going to put in place in your homes that will point to Jesus instead of hiding him behind the material greed of Xmas?
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- **I want to suggest that whatever you spend on gifts for your children, buy a gift of the equivalent value for a poor person**
 - Put things in it that a poor person would need – some **toiletries** perhaps, some non-perishable **food** and one or two **BRAND NEW** items of **clothing**
 - Put it under the Christmas tree and then at some point on or just after Christmas **find some needy person** and bless their socks off!
 - **If we are to be like John the Baptist preaching the message of Christ then we need to do it in actions**
 - **It is the only way we can point people to Jesus at Christmas**

BROKEN-HEARTED

- The word here means those who are broken both **physically** and **spiritually**
- Clearly the central message of Jesus ministry was to bind up those who are **spiritually broken**
- He came to make us spiritually whole and to bring us back to God
- But as much as that Jesus in so many ways **physically heals those who's bodies are broken**

- We don't have to look far to find broken people this Christmas
- **Tygerberg, Karl Bremmer, Stikland** will all be filled with people who have broken bodies and broken minds
- People who need to find **comfort and healing** this Christmas
- People who in very **real and tangible** ways need to know Jesus presence with them

- **So what tradition are you and your family going to create that will allow you to be a blessing to the broken?**
- Let me propose again that a simple card with a biblical message of encouragement and hope
- Make it a family thing that instead gorging yourselves on Christmas eve you as a **family make 20 or 30 cards**, head down to the hospital and give them out
- **You will be astounded at what a sermon you will preach in action**
- And how you will **reveal Jesus** to those people

PRISONERS

- **Our prisons in South Africa are amongst the fullest in the world**
- We are running at 150% capacity in many of them
- Prisoners are living in **horrific conditions** subject to all sort of crime that happens inside the prison walls – it is worse inside than out let me tell you
- **Why not cook an extra Christmas meal or two and take them down to your local police holding cells**
- Or I can give you contact details for a ministry team who goes into **Pollsmoor**
- **These people perhaps have become most blinded by the criminal world in which they live and this is a simple yet wonderful opportunity to share Jesus love in this season of hope**

CAPTIVES

- **Isaiah is talking here not about prisoners but those who have been taken away from home**
- This country because of it's wealth has become a **place of refuge** for tens of thousands of men and woman seeking a better life
- In some areas in Cape Town you may hear 10 or 15 **different languages** spoken on the same street
- **All refugees from another place, seeking a better world, living on hope trying to make ends meet**
- **Xenophobia, unemployment and a strange culture far from home are all major issues**
- And at Christmas they will even more alone that ever
- **Isolated from culture, community and family**
- **There are numerous ways we can reveal Jesus to these people**
- **At least three of our churches have large portions of their congregation who are refugees**
- Why not **phone the churches** find someone who they know will be alone this Christmas and **have them round to your place** for Christmas day
- Share a couple of hours and a few rands that will make a permanent mark in their lives

CONCLUSION

- **John the Baptist says to the people standing there "Jesus is in your midst but you do not know Him"**
- And so it is with all the **clamour and noise** of Christmas that Jesus has been obscured to such a point that although he is in our midst **many have failed to know Him**
- **The church in many ways has failed to reveal Jesus to the world**
- We have been **unsuccessful in standing and pointing** and telling people "There is Jesus the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world"

- **And so many have failed to know Jesus**
- **They have failed to understand his love for them**
- And **our role** as the people of God is to cry out like John, in the spiritual wilderness in which we find ourselves – **"make ready for Jesus"**
- We to whom the **truth has been made known**, need to help the world to open it's eyes
- To help them see him, to help them know Him and to help come to him that they too might find rest for their souls
- **And so what I'm asking is not that we give up Christmas**
- **But that we change it with passion, creativity and love**
- **That we mould it and shape it into something that brings glory and honour to Jesus**
- **Instead of pushing him to the side in favour of myths and legends**
- **I am talking about getting rid of the rubbish and pointing instead to the truth**

- **I am asking that we liberate this time of celebration that it might be used to spread the gospel of Jesus instead of spreading the rule of capitalism**
- **I'm asking that we all make some changes to the way we do Christmas that we might reveal to the world the incredible, extraordinary, life changing love of Christ**
- **We can in simple powerful actions reveal to the world the Son of God at Christmas**
- Like John we can point and tell people there is Jesus who has come to preach good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners to proclaim the year of the Lord favor

Amen