

What makes us authentic? What might cause us to doubt things we know to be true or even our own ability to live out our beliefs or convictions?

On Tuesday evening I watched the final of the *Best British Choir*. I hadn't seen any of the other episodes so it was a little odd – but there were three choirs in the final. A senior school choir from Reading, a male acapella choir from Exeter University and a Gospel choir who were from a Pentecostal Church in Leicester.

The challenge for the final was to sing two songs – one chosen by Gareth Malone and one by another choir – aiming to push them out of their comfort Zone. The male choir – who were a bit like barber shop style were quite impressive but the challenge they were given was to sing a gospel song – musically they seemed to be able to do it – but for a lot of the episode it didn't really work – Gareth Malone pointed out that to sing Gospel you have to believe what you singing – actually I suspect this is true of any song or performance – but it is particularly the case for Gospel.

Gareth got the group to look into each other's eyes and sing the opening line 'Praise him' till they looked comfortable and believable – it actually worked. The way we present a song, the way that we approach a presentation – our style for want of a better word so often relays so much of the message we are trying to communicate. Whether it is a Gospel song, or our mission to the world.

There are many times in our lives when we say things which may not be fully true to ourselves, we may even think we believe them – but they just don't quite sit right – or sometimes we might not even admit what we believe – our doubt is too strong.

Then for some, no matter how authentic we may be, their own scepticism means that they will never believe us. Our readings today address how often our fear can limit our ability to receive an authentic message – but also there is something about not losing hope as we wait for confirmation or fulfilment the authentic message we are looking for.

On the third Sunday of Advent, when we hear the story of John the Baptist again. We have made a huge jump from the reading last week to the end of John's ministry and the start of Jesus'. John has been imprisoned, and in fact is a relatively short period of time will be executed by Herod at the request of his wife. John is stuck within his prison cell, and while he was the one that baptised Jesus, despite the fact that he announced that Jesus was the Messiah – doubt seems to enter him.

It is not hard to imagine why – despite John's faith he was now isolated and he must have felt a little fearful of the fate that was awaiting him. And then the news that was reaching his ears was of his cousin Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners – the man he believed would be the fulfilment of the repentance that he had preached. John thought Jesus would bring peace to the earth and was the promise of hope to all people – and yet John has a little panic because Jesus is not bringing about change in the way that he had hoped.

John's disappointment, may not be that different from one that we may have from time to time. We too, come to every Christmas with the hope that there will be peace on earth and there will be good will between all – and yet as we look for the coming of Christ, war still dominates our world, and our neighbours and friends may not treat us with the respect we would like.

In the Advent darkness, like the cell in which John waited, there is the temptation to question 'God is this really you – will peace on earth come'?

So how did Jesus respond to John? Jesus said "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." This may not have been what John wanted to hear – as it is not a clear, strong answer – and yet it contains more strength and wisdom than what we might notice at first glance.

I think what Jesus is saying to John is that when we admit our need for help, when we acknowledge our vulnerability, when we identify with those who depend on God, it is then that we discover who Jesus really is. (A bit like meaning what you sing) The authenticity is not in the words or even in the report- but in the evidence of Jesus actions.

And I think God says the same to us in this Advent season, in the midst of all the uncertainty of our time is – don't look for me in coherent argument or certainty or even in familiarity. If you want to find the heart of your faith, look into your own heart and acknowledge those things which cause fear or doubt or uncertainty and hand them over to God. It won't magically turn into hope or transformation; but in that vulnerability and honesty we will find Christ. Because in the end the whole point of Advent and of Christmas is the acknowledgement that God is ALWAYS for us, and with us – whether we permit ourselves to see it or not.

John within the darkness of his prison cell knew that too! He already knew that Jesus was the Messiah, but he needed to be reminded of what that meant. It did mean peace on earth – but not through meeting with leaders of the time, but by working with those who most needed love and healing.

It is a good reminder to be looking for the unexpected, for the unknown. James told the readers of his letter to be patient – Jesus will come and things will change – but rather than obsessing about when and how this will be – look into yourselves and find strength and patience – like a gardener waiting for seeds to grow.

It is a good image – the patience of the gardener or the farmer – for the seeds and blossoms to come in due season – and we need keep watch for the signs that change is coming, or actions we need to take to prepare for the frost or a drought.

We are invited to do the same. As we continue in our advent journey we are invited to look within ourselves and acknowledge those things which make us vulnerable or

cause us fear, or even drain our energy – and like John we are invited to take our questions to Jesus – intentionally in prayer. And we are expected to wait and listen for the answer.

*be given, God will grant all in God's time."*

A couple of years ago in our Advent study group there was a poem which summed this up – and I think on this third Sunday of Advent it is worth hearing again.

### **Kneeling**

**BY R. S. THOMAS**

Moments of great calm,  
Kneeling before an altar  
Of wood in a stone church  
In summer, waiting for the God  
To speak; the air a staircase  
For silence; the sun's light  
Ringing me, as though I acted  
A great role. And the audiences  
Still; all that close throng  
Of spirits waiting, as I,  
For the message.  
Prompt me, God;  
But not yet. When I speak,  
Though it be you who speak  
Through me, something is lost.  
The meaning is in the waiting.

God is in the midst of the waiting and seeking - In the midst of our hopes, and also in the midst of our vulnerabilities – this is after all what makes us authentic. And into the middle of this God whispers – be aware! Look around. You are not alone. Things are changing and God is here – in the midst of it all. Amen.