

Who are you? ...

What do you say about yourself? St. John 1:22

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Who are you?

That's the question that's put to John the Baptist in this week Gospel.

Who are you?

With all of the commotion surrounding him; with all the bold things that he's been saying and doing; all of the hurried conversations of the people of Jerusalem as they head out of the city on their way to the Jordan River to be baptised by him; as we might imagine, with all of this John has attracted the attention of the authorities.

Maybe he's even frightened them a little bit. Stirring up the status quo usually does.

So they send their questions. They need to know.

Who do you think that you are?

Why are you doing the strange things that you're doing?

What gives you the authority to turn the city upside down?

To get everyone all stirred up.

Who are you?

The answers that John gives to their insistent questions say a lot about what the people of his own time were thinking; perhaps even what they were most hoping for. His answers speak to what their fears and worries were. The answers that John gives speak to their great yearning for salvation; for delivery; their deep yearning to be rescued. His answers speak of their desperate need for hope; for someone to tell them that things wouldn't always be the way that things were; hope that things would get better; hope that God was going to act to end their occupation; that century after century of political oppression might finally come to an end; that they might at last, at long last, be free; a free people living in their own land with their own name.

We hear all of these fears in John's answers; answers that speak of their long-held hope for the Messiah. For redemption. For a Saviour.

But John is also perfectly clear in all that he says: he's clear that he is not the answer to their fears; that he is not the answer to their hopes.

That answer, he tells them lies somewhere else.

John says as clearly as he can, as often as he can, that he is not the Christ.

That he is not even the prophet.

That he is nothing more, he says, than a voice.

A voice crying in the wilderness.

The wilderness of Israel, to be sure; but even now in the wilderness of our own hearts; and the wilderness of our very broken, very angry, world.

Now, as you may recall, at the very centre of the baptismal service the parents and godparents of a child are asked to do a seemingly simple thing: they are asked to name the child whom they are bring to baptism

Now, once upon a time, long before government departments of vital statistics, that part of the service played a significant legal role: it was the point where a new child

officially received his or her name; a name they would carry for the rest of their lives; and beyond.

But, as we know, such official namings now take place long before, within days of birth; but here in Church we still ask the parents and godparents to name the child whom they bring to baptism.

And that's because in baptism that child receives a whole new name: not the family name that marks them as a member of one or more families; but the name that marks them forever as members of the family of God.

So, on this day when we hear John asked who he is we are also being asked that same question: who are we?

And what does it mean for us to bear the name of Christ; as we do by virtue of our own baptism?

In an anxious world where all too often we hear words of anger and judgement and impatience; in a world where bitterness and resentment fill all too many hearts, even at a time of year when we hope and pray for family unity and peace; in a world in which happiness is all too uncertain, what does it mean for us to bear the name of Christ?

And how does bearing Christ's name equip us to navigate through the disorder and confusion of a divided world?

That's what St. Paul is speaking about in this week's Epistle when he challenges us to rejoice at all times.

He's telling us that because we live in Christ we don't have to surrender to the negativity and anxiety around us and within us; because we know always that 'the Lord is always at hand, no matter what comes; that we can have peace in a world where peace is all too hard to find.

And how we respond in the midst of all of this world's disorder will be the clearest answer we can ever give to the question of who we are.

How we respond every day in conversations with friend and family; how we respond at work; how we respond in the face of disappointment and betrayal; how we respond in the face of bitterness and resentment; in the face of rejection and insult, will tell others who we really are more than words ever will.

So, who are we?

Well, in the words of Brennan Manning, we are those whom Jesus loves.¹

And because we are those whom Jesus loves we can, by grace, rejoice in every situation, choosing kindness and compassion and love; not because it's easy or popular but because it's the right thing to do.

So, who are we?

We are members of Christ.

We are [the] children of God.

We are inheritors of the Kingdom of Heaven.

That's the name that we were given in baptism.

So, may we always bear that name in love and joy; offering a different way; offering a better way to our frightened and anxious world.

¹ Philip Yancey, *The Scandal of Forgiveness*, p. 30