

THE REVD JONATHAN AITKEN SERMON

Sunday 7 February 2021



ST MATTHEW'S WESTMINSTER

JOHN 1: 1-14

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St Matthew's Westminster, 20 Great Peter Street

Even for those who go to church only once a year today's Gospel reading will be familiar, for this is the Gospel reading appointed for Christmas Day.

Its majestic, mysterious opening "In the beginning was the word.."

strikes deep chords in our spiritual memories, even when the Church of England's Lectionary, rather surprisingly, insists that it should be read again 45 days later.

Although I am tempted to offer you a Christmas Day sermon, exploring the profoundest depths of the revelation that The Word became Flesh, instead on this Second Sunday before Lent let us look for a fresh angle on this Gospel and concentrate today on verses 6 to 7 which read:

"There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.

He came as a witness to testify to the Light, so that all might believe through him.

Witnesses who testify to the Light of Christ are rare people.

They come in all shapes, sizes, styles and disguises. They are "All sorts and conditions of men" in the language of the Book of Common Prayer.

When John the Baptist came on the scene he must have seemed a bit of an oddball. Completely out of sorts with the smooth men of the synagogues, the scribes and the Pharisees, he wore camel's hair, lived in the wilderness, ate only locusts and honey, and preached about the need for repentance with uncomfortable fervour.

As Jesus said of him, he was not the sort of man who dressed in fine robes like you see in royal palaces. Indeed, he really upset the royal palace of King Herod who jailed him and beheaded him.

Why? Because John dared to speak truth to power.

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He was the first and finest Christian witness, for as Jesus said of him:

"No one has arisen greater than John the Baptist".

Who follows in his footsteps now in the 21st century?

To answer this solemn question, I will take as my text, as old-fashioned preachers used to say, a paradoxically humorous skit from *Beyond the Fringe*.

Most of you will be far too young to remember *Beyond the Fringe*, the satirical show in the 1960s that catapulted Peter Cook, Dudley Moore, Alan Bennett and Jonathan Miller to stardom.

One of the funniest sketches consisted of Peter Cook parodying a vicar opening his sermon with the verse:

"My brother Esau is an hairy man, but I am a smooth man!"

Now John the Baptist was definitely 'an hairy' man. Camel hair for starters!

But the phrase is not about dress.

Our opening hymn sung by the choir this morning, "To be a Pilgrim", was written by John Bunyan. He could be called 'an hairy' man. A Non-Conformist who spoke uncomfortable truths to power, he was thrown into jail for his Christian witness and, as his legacy, he gave the world one of the great spiritual classics of all time "A Pilgrim's Progress".

Coming closer to our own time, we might nominate as modern figures in this league of great men and women of God such as: Dietrich Bonhoeffer; Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King to name but three. But they are 20th century figures, and we are two decades into the 21st century.

We may, particularly in the post pandemic era, need new kinds of witnesses to the Light of Christ.

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By coincidence, or perhaps God incidence, I have felt closely involved this week with two remarkable 21st century witnesses to the light of Christ.

One of these contemporary witnesses is Michael Emmett.

You may not have heard of him, although this week he has had plenty of media attention. He even managed to have full page articles about himself in *The Sun* and *The Tablet* – an unusual left and right!

This week Harper Collins published his book *Sins of Fathers: A Spectacular Break from a Dark Criminal Past*. I wrote the foreword in which I described it as a “Mighty rushing cataract of an autobiography” and continued: “The author (whom I have known for over twenty years) is by any measurement a big man of physical stature; of law-breaking villainy and ultimately in his late-flowering passion for Jesus Christ.”

I know a fair bit about Michael Emmett's passion for Jesus because for about twenty years we have been doing gigs together in jails, often under the auspices of Alpha for Prisons.

I'll leave it to you to guess which one of us gets cast as the smooth man and which as the hairy man. Anyway, we are collaborators, not competitors.

What I can say is that Michael Emmett is a magnificently effective witness for Christ. I can't touch the hem of his garment as an evangelist to prisoners.

He holds them spell-bound when he tells them his dramatic stories, such as getting arrested by 50 policemen at gunpoint when he was carrying out Britain's biggest ever drug-smuggling operation, for which he was given, what was at the time, a huge sentence of twelve and a half years.

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But far more riveting is the story of how Michael Emmett came to Christ, fought off his demons, stayed with Christ, went deeper with Christ and today is probably the most effective witness for Christ to the fraternity of the fallen behind bars.

And here is the powerful conclusion to his book:

"I want to live in my connection with God because everything is there and I do not need anything else. Love comes from that connection as do peace, joy, finances, friendships and church".

Beat that for Christian witness!

Now, here in quiet contemplative Anglo Catholic St Matthew's Westminster, it may be a bit of a stretch to imagine being a hairy hot gopeller in the high voltage style of Michael Emmett. But, as I said at the beginning, witnesses who testify to the Light of Christ have many different styles.

So, by contrast, as my second contemporary example, I want to single out today for high praise as a Christian witness someone well-known to us at St Matthew's Westminster, who has been in the headlines this week.

He is the Bishop of Lincoln, Christopher Lowson, who often worships here and whose wife, Susan, serves on our Parochial Church Council.

For the last twenty months it has not been possible to call Chris 'Bishop of Lincoln', because in April 2019 he became the first Church of England Bishop for 500 years to be suspended, also having his Permission to Officiate withdrawn.

His suspension was ordered under the new and already much-discredited Safeguarding and Clergy Discipline Measure 2016. It was to do with allegations of safeguarding failure.

Those of us who knew Chris and knew the story regarded these allegations as nonsense.

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They reminded me of a catch phrase much used by the late Mayor La Guardia of New York, who was in the habit of dismissing this or that nonsensical rumour in the Big Apple with the words:

"However thin ya slice it, it's still baloney."

The allegations against Chris did indeed turn out to be complete baloney, but it took a Secular Judge to cut through the lengthy and labyrinthine Disciplinary Processes of the Church of England to deliver the decisive ruling in court that there was no case to answer.

So, very belatedly and with a gracious apology from the Archbishop of Canterbury, Chris Lowson has now been vindicated with honour and restored to his Episcopal See complete with PTO. He will shortly resume his full duties as Bishop of Lincoln.

One can only hope, to paraphrase John the Baptist, that the Church Administrators responsible for this deplorably delayed injustice will "show the fruits of their repentance." Now, what has this got to do with Christian Witness and John 1: 6-7?

Rather a lot, because, in the biblical tradition of Isaiah's suffering servant, Chris Lowson endured the shame of his suspension with grace, dignity, forbearance – and silence.

Silent Christian Witness can have great power, as indeed Jesus demonstrated in front of Pilate.

The exemplary way Chris Lowson suffered through his ordeal with grace should teach us all, in our age of accusatory noise, that the still, small whisper of innocence can prevail.

In our social media-led blame game culture, Christian witnesses can set alternative and better standards, either by their clear testimony or by their quiet example.

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The age of Coronavirus has been a period of social, as well as medical, darkness. Now that there is vaccine light at the end of the tunnel there needs to be spiritual light also.

Father Philip mentioned in a recent sermon that he and I have recently been pondering and praying about a profound verse, Isaiah 45:3:

"I will give you treasures of darkness,

Riches hidden in secret place,

So that you may know that I am The Lord."

Let us pray that Christians, as different as ex gangster Michael Emmett and restored Bishop Christopher Lowson, will lighten our darkness with their contemporary examples and witness.

Amen