

SERMON: 2017/12/31 (1st Sunday aft. Christmas, Year B) - Isa. 61:10-62:3 & John 1:1-18_BTR

[Invite the children to sit at the front. Draw a labyrinth on a chalkboard with an exit avenue pointing to the words 'ABUNDANT LIFE!']

In our Old Testament reading this morning, we heard the prophet, Isaiah, speak of Jesus as 'like a burning torch'. [62:1]

Then, in our gospel from John, we hear him describing Jesus as 'the light of all people' [1:4].

This isn't just a coincidence.

But what do they mean?

Jesus isn't *actually* a lamp, which I can stand on my bedside table.

He isn't an electrical appliance.

So what do they mean?

Well, let's imagine that this labyrinth is the way to abundant, eternal life; and you've got to navigate your way through it using this chalk.

Now, imagine that you had to do that in 'darkness', which is the world without Christ, okay?

Right, I need a volunteer to wear this blindfold...

Oh dear, they didn't do very well did they?

And what does that tell us?

That we are lost without faith.

Let's pray: Father God,

[Ask children to leave.]

On this day *in 1384*, in the little town of Lutterworth, England, John *Wycliffe* died.

He was a fascinating character:

A protestant before the Protestants, he was born in Yorkshire - my old county - a whole *century* before Luther came along (and launched the "Reformation"), and yet in *many* ways their criticism of the Church overlapped significantly.[n.1]

He was a philosopher, a priest *and* an academic at Oxford University.

'A contemporary source describes him as having a distinctly charismatic aura

and a frail...birdlike physique' [n.2]

Very much a hothead [n.3], and often standing barefoot [n.4], he lambasted his clerical colleagues - vicars, bishops, *the Pope(!)* - in lectures - and (widely-circulated) pamphlets - for their worldliness; for their careerist, uninspired conformism.

And instead he advocated that *all* Christians should 'put away...niceties and imitate the poor' [n.5], which seemed like a "revolutionary" message, [n.6].

And one that was very troubling to "the establishment," who sought, with violence and intimidation, to silence him.

But, in spite of the danger, he attracted followers called, by historians, "the Lollards."

They adopted Wycliffe's style of 'rustic' living [n.7], and, I quote, 'went about England in couples, clad in russet gowns, preaching at fairs, in market-places and [in...]houses, teaching...Christianity with zeal and simplicity', [n.8].

And that's the "key word" in my message: "simplicity."

Because in many significant respects, *John* Wycliffe was very alike John *The Baptist*, who plays an important role at the beginning of the New Testament and in the life of the Saviour, Christ.

Unlike his cousin, our Lord, The Baptist didn't live among the bustling, charming hill-villages of Galilee; but in a place called "Bethany beyond the Jordan", that is, to the east, *outside* the borders of modern Israel; in the 'wilderness' [Mt. 3:1] - *the desert*.

Well, what was John doing out there?
Why did he eat locusts of all things?
And wear camel skins?

I've been to the place where he lived, and it isn't hospitable - not by any stretch of the imagination:

Like the surface of Mars:

lots of *hard*, barren red rock.

The heat's *intense*.

And next to nothing grows.

Not *even* cacti can tolerate those desperately dry, salty conditions.

His existence would've been an *intensely* lonely one.

And at night: freezing.

Yes, Luke mentions that "crowds" came 'out' to see him in that desolate place

[3:7], and perhaps some offered a little charity - a few homely comforts (like a blanket or firewood), but *most*, likely, made that long trek from the cities to only stare at that peculiar "caveman," like the visitors to a(n old fashioned) freak-show:

The Baptist's excited ravings about the 'wrath' of God raining down on the earth as an 'unquenchable fire' from the Heavens and the imminent arrival of the Messiah [see: Mt. 3:7-12] would have been an entertaining spectacle in those pre-Netflix days.

Perhaps people brought the kids, and they would jeer and laugh.

Later, he does seem to have recruited a few "disciples" from somewhere [Mt. 11:2 / Lk. 7:18].

And it is possible that they and him were outcasts from a secretive sect called "Qumran," which was sequestered nearby in the rocky cliffs to the south, overlooking his camp by the sterile Dead Sea. [n.9]

But whether this is the case or not, both groups were *very* marginal: rejects or, if you prefer, "refugees," from mainstream society.

And why is that?

Because John couldn't and wouldn't operate in areas where the *conventionally* religious were in control: I'm referring, of course, to the Sadducees: those 'priests and Levites,' [Jn 1:19] who ran the Temple in Jerusalem.

They 'persecuted' and ridiculed eccentrics like him [n.10], and sought to silent his voice by branding it as "extremist;" and in return he saw them as a nest of snakes [Mt. 3:7]; men who claimed to be godly but who, as politicians and businessmen; "pillars" of the community; lynchpins of an orderly status quo - were suspect: to be clear, it is *because* of their "acceptability" that John condemns them.

Reading between the lines, you can undoubtedly hear him saying - by word and action:

"Are you really what God has in mind?"

"Is that what 'holiness' looks like?"

Being *ordinary*?

"Blending in"?

"Keeping up with the Joneses"?

No.

Because whilst normalcy is no great evil, it isn't the solution either. But a new kind of slavery - to Amazon. To War-Mart.

To our creditors and to very dubious foreign powers (like China and OPEC).
And Jesus shows us a different way - a new humanity.
One that is more beautiful *but also* less comfortable than you might really like:
One that we glimpse in the Johns that I've been describing.

And *this* is why the "Church Father" John Chrysostom - one of the earliest, most important theologians - explicitly calls on us to 'emulate' his namesake[n. 10].

Not - necessarily(!) - in detail.
But absolutely in principle.

Let's take a moment to reflect.

Footnotes:

1. Gairdner, James (1908), *Lollardy and the Reformation in England: An Historical Survey*, Volume I, London: Macmillan & Co., 7-8.
2. Lahey, Stephen E. (2009), *John Wyclif*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 4.
3. *Ibid.*, 7.
4. Aston, Margaret (April, 1965), 'John Wycliffe's Reformation Reputation,' *Past & Present*, No. 30, pp. 23-51, 35.
5. Levy, Ian Christopher (2005), 'John Wyclif: Christian Patience in a Time of War,' *Theological Studies*, Volume 66, pp. 330-357, 330.
6. Aston, M. E. (April, 1960), 'Lollardy and Sedition 1381-1431,' *Past & Present*, No. 17, pp. 1-44, 3.
7. McFarlane, K. B. (1972), *Wycliffe and English Non-Conformity*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 152.
8. Carrick, J. C. (1908), *Wycliffe and The Lollards*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 199.
9. For example: Daniélou, Jean (1958), *The Dead Sea Scrolls and Primitive Christianity*, translated by Salvator Attanasio, Baltimore, M. D.: Helicon Press, 15-24. Conversely, see also: Hutchinson, John C. (April 2002), 'Was John the Baptist an Essene from Qumran?', *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Volume 159, pp. 187-200.
10. Flusser, David (2007), *Judaism of the Second Temple Period: Volume I - Qumran and Apocalypticism*, translated by Azzan Yadin, Grand Rapids, M. I.: William B. Eerdmans Co., 232.
11. Kelhoffer, James A. (2005), *The Diet of John the Baptist: 'Locusts and Wild Honey' in Synoptic and Patristic Interpretation*, Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 135.