

Sermons at the Anglican Church of Luxembourg

Preached by Rev. Geoff Read on Sunday 1st September 2019

Text: John 2:22-36

Jesus called him “the greatest man who ever lived” (Mt 11:11)

But the greatness of his cousin John, who we call the Baptist, was lived out in the obscurity of the desert and ended with decapitation through the toxic combination of a proud Herod and a manipulative Salome

John had gathered around him a group of disciples and it is this group who are confused when, in response to questions about Jewish ritual purification, John speaks of the baptising Jesus is also undertaking

As Jesus baptises so his popularity grows at the expense, in their opinion, of John’s

But in response, John, says these words: “He must increase, but I must decrease...”

Indeed, as we have already heard that decrease is to the point of death

The secret of John’s greatness lies in two things:

His calling and his obedience to that calling

Over centuries the OT prophets have pointed to the One who is to come, the chosen One, Messiah

But now, after the silence of the intertestamental period, God not only once again speaks through a prophet but that prophet can literally point to Messiah in their midst

And John is clear that the only reason he can do that is because: “No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven” (3:27)

The message is not his: it is God’s. He is only a messenger. That is his calling

And as he engages in this John is delighted: like a best friend, a best man rejoicing in his friend, the groom’s, good fortune in marrying such a beautiful bride, so John rejoices in the way Jesus is emerging to draw people to himself and, in doing so, fulfil his vocation as Son of God, chosen One, Messiah

Being secure in that message and in his role as messenger, John is free to engage in the costly obedience it requires

But in doing so He is again merely prophesying what is to come for Jesus himself

We often speak of people being upwardly mobile.

Well, one writer has spoken of such costliness for both Jesus and for John as a call not to upward mobility but downward mobility

John speak of this as how “he must increase, but I must decrease”

But even that increasing for Jesus is one that seems so strange

Later in John’s gospel Jesus spoke of his calling and his obedience to that calling like this: “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (12:24)

But then here’s the bit for us, for here and now as Jesus continues:

Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour. (12:25-26)

Yesterday I was in Köln, seeing my daughter Katya. We walked along Dürenerstrasse in a suburb called Lindental and bought an ice cream. As we walked back licking our double cones my eye was caught by a plaque on the wall of number 89

It was to commemorate the site of the Carmelite convent where Edith Stein had lived for five years up to 1938 when she fled to Holland to escape, for a time, Nazi persecution. A brilliant philosopher and theologian, a convert from Judaism, in four short years later she would be dead, murdered in Auschwitz

It is said that from 1940 Stein knew that she would not survive the war. Her fellow Carmelite sisters recounted how she quietly trained herself for life in a concentration camp, enduring cold and hunger

Westerbork was staging post for Dutch Jews and here, given the chance to escape, Stein replied: "If somebody intervened at this point and took away my chance to share in the fate of my brothers and sisters, that would be utter annihilation"

Calling and obedience. Downward mobility.

What does that look like for you, for me, here and now?