

**May I speak in the name of the living God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.**

He was much taller than I was expecting.

I didn't expect him to be as old as that.

She spoke with a much stronger accent than
I thought she would.

I wasn't expecting her to be such a dragon!

He was much younger than I expected.

I am sure that we have all had experiences
of meeting someone for the first time, and
finding that they were not quite how we
expected. It might have been a new teacher,
a new doctor, or dare I say it, even a new
Vicar (although I'm not so new any longer!)

Or it might have been a well known TV or film personality, or an author. We might have seen their films, read their books, heard a great deal about them – but when we meet them in the flesh for the first time, there is something about them which doesn't quite fit with our mental image of what we were expecting.

This was very true for John the Baptist.

John believed without any shadow of a doubt that God was sending a saviour into the world.

He believed that he had been called in a special way to prepare people to receive him.

John believed that Jesus was indeed the coming Messiah, as he baptised him in the River Jordan.

But now, locked up in a dark dungeon with the threat of death hanging over him, it seems that he began to have doubts about Jesus.

John's idea of the Messiah was that of a stern, uncompromising judge who would execute a fiery judgement.

But Jesus wasn't living up to that image.

Instead of acting like a judge, Jesus was acting like a saviour.

His radiant friendliness contrasted sharply with the severity of John.

John was an ascetic, who lived apart from the people. But Jesus mixed with the people, eating and drinking with sinners. John prophesied the judgement of God; Jesus prophesied the salvation of God.

Knowing that his life was ending, John wanted to know for sure, that Jesus really was the one, so he sent two of his disciples to question Jesus.

When the two asked Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come?”

Jesus might have replied with a straightforward, '**Yes, I am.**' But he didn't.

There is a well-known saying: Actions speak louder than words.

So, instead of trying to convince John's messengers with words, Jesus pointed to the works he was doing. Those works were exactly the kind of things Isaiah had predicted would happen when the Messiah came.

Throughout the ministry of Jesus:

The eyes of the blind were quite literally
opened,

The deaf could hear,

The lame could walk,

and the dumb could speak.

Jesus was quite happy to let his deeds
speak for him.

And so in pointing towards these things, in
his reply to John, it was obvious that indeed,
Jesus was 'the one who was to come'.

Today on this third Sunday in Advent, we reflect on the way in which John helped to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus.

John was the last and greatest of the long line of prophets who prepared the people for the coming of the Messiah.

He was one of those selfless and courageous people who kept alive the hopes of the people during the long night of expectation, when it seemed that the dawn would never come.

And Jesus paid a great tribute to him. He said that John was no reed swaying in the wind. In other words, he wasn't easily influenced by prevailing trends and opinions. He was his own man - a strong personality and a man of principle.

John didn't go in for a life of comfort and ease. No fancy clothes for him. He lived not in a palace but in the desert -a place of sand, thorn bushes, heat, cold, hunger, thirst, and loneliness.

He devoted himself totally to the mission God gave him, which was to prepare the way for Jesus. When his task was done, he moved aside to make way for Jesus.

He was a true prophet (spokesperson for God). His lifestyle, as well as his personal integrity, added meaning to his words. He was a living example of what he preached. No wonder people flocked to see and hear him and were moved by his words.

But as all true prophets, John pointed not to his own life, but to God, and helped people to see and recognise Jesus as the Messiah.

But how can people see and recognise him today?

I once had an interesting experience, whilst doing some Christmas shopping in the Friary Shopping Centre in Guildford. In the malls, there were a number of stalls selling a whole range of gifts, such as calendars, perfumes, and jewellery. There was also a stall selling children's toys – radio controlled jeeps and flying saucers. The stall was staffed by a young man and woman. As I walked past the stall, the man called out to me – ***“She says I look like Jesus.” Do I look like Jesus?***

He did look a little like Robert Powell, who played the part of Jesus in the film “Jesus of Nazareth,” but that was about it....

The answer to recognising Jesus in our world today, goes back to the answer Jesus gave to John's disciples. In his reply, Jesus said, look at my actions.

This account of an incident might help us to reflect on this.

A group of business men were attending a national convention in Town. They had assured their families that they would be home in time for dinner. But the meeting ran overtime so they had to run for the train. Tickets in hand, they dashed along the platform. One of them knocked over a table supporting a basket of apples. But neither he nor any of his companions stopped to help the young lad who staffed the apple stand... All reached the train and boarded it with a sigh of relief.

But then one of them felt a twinge of compassion for the lad whose apple stand had been overturned. He immediately decided to do something about it.

Saying good-bye to his companions, he returned to the scene of the accident. He was glad he did so. He discovered that the young lad was blind.

The business man began to gather up the apples. As he did so he noticed that some of them were bruised. He took out his wallet and handing the lad some money he said, *'Here, take this for the damage we did. I hope we didn't ruin your day.'* As he started to walk away, the bewildered lad called after him, *'Are you Jesus?' Are you Jesus?*

Of course he wasn't Jesus, but in a very real sense, Jesus could be recognised working in and through him, because he acted like Jesus.

So where is Jesus to be found today?

In his disciples.

Every time we help someone to see new meaning and direction in their lives,

Every time we help someone to hear words of comfort spoken by God, through the prophets, or in the life and teaching of Jesus,

Every time we give a voice to the vulnerable and powerless in our world – all those unable to speak for themselves,

Every time we help someone who is down trodden by oppression or the stresses and strains of life, to pick themselves up and walk again with confidence,

Every time we give items for the food bank supporting those who are struggling,

Every time a night shelter offers warmth and shelter to someone who would otherwise have spent the night on the streets,

Every time a community welcomes refugees and provides the love and practical support they need to begin to build a new life.

Every time we put our faith into action through deeds of love and kindness; people will encounter Jesus in us and through us, and know that he is indeed the Messiah. Amen.