

# New Kilpatrick

## Sermon

13th January 2019

John 3:22-36

***Spirit... take us beyond our routine visions... our everyday language... our limited experiences... and invite in us... a new colour, a new word, a new place to dream... that we might discover you again... in a new way... So be it... Amen***

Earlier this week... the newspapers reported that astronomers... have observed repeated bursts of radio waves... coming from deep space... There are a lot of radio signals coming from deep space... but because these are repeating... this could be evidence of alien technology we are told... and thus there is life somewhere in the depths of the universe...

If this is true... and they are sending us signals... and if they are about to visit us... might they not have chosen a better time for first contact...

The world's in a bit of a mess... Humanity is not wearing its best clothes at the moment... and would any of us want an alien race to make first contact in the middle of Brexit negotiations... a US government shut down... a terrible war in Syria and Yemen with inhuman famine there too... to name but a few examples of the worst of ourselves...

It is perhaps a flippant way of making a point... but we're not showing ourselves off at our best at the moment... If those aliens were to land... and witnessed the human race... what would they think of us...

Might it be close to what people thought of John the baptist in his time... If the idea of aliens was around in that age... then perhaps some would think he was one... especially given the dramatic appearance of the man... interestingly not offered to us by the gospel of John but certainly in the other gospels...

A wild man... appearing from the wilderness... wearing camel skins and eating locusts... and shouting... He did a lot of shouting... about repentance... about those holy men who thought they were someone... about the temple religion... and the control it had over people...

And people would come out to see him... waist deep in the Jordan... hair soaking... camel skin heavy... as he shouted at the pharisees... standing by the rivers edge... dressed in their black and gold...

We can create the scene however we wish... the hyperbole serves us well...

Except...

Except the Baptist we meet in John's Gospel... isn't at all like that... I don't know where the gospel writer put the more colourful figure... but this John is a far more rational... humble figure...

And there isn't a face off between him and the temple religion... What there is an argument about what his disciples see Jesus disciples doing...

It is a moment we probably all recognise in our humanity... when someone else is doing what we do... stolen our idea and are more popular than we were... That's what's happening here... The Original... the 'You saw it here first' baptiser... has a young pretender... in the name of Jesus... and John's disciples don't like it...

They are upset that the fickle crowds... are flocking to the new kid on the river bank... despite them being the first... Jesus has become more popular... and the rather calmer... more grounded version of John in this Gospel... simply recognises the reality... "I must decrease... as he increases"... says John...

But it's not just a reality check... that recognises crowd loyalty never lasts... or that as populism rises it also falls... It is a deeper... more gracious thing... for the sake of the kingdom this must happen...

The long game is the kingdom... that is who we serve... not ourselves... and perhaps in our imagination we can hear John discuss this with his disciples... "What is our priority... for what reason do we baptise... have we don't tis for ourselves... or for the kingdom?"...

Right there at the beginning of the this new outpouring of the kingdom... almost even before it has even begun... there is a dispute... “Who do we exist for?”... ourselves... or the kingdom...

Last October I was asked to go to a conference organised by the national church to help write a radical action plan for the church... Their words...

And I repeated a comment I’d made at a previous conference that designed the the national plan that was thrown out at the last assembly... “How many people did you talk to beyond the walls of the church?”... and in both instances came back the reply... none...

And someone asked me “why are you so keen to speak to people beyond the church?”... and the answer is profoundly simply... because we don’t exist for ourselves... We don’t exist so we can keep ourselves going... we don’t exist to increase numbers... to pass the church on in a healthy financial or numerical state...

We exist for those folk who don’t come... who live their lives beyond the walls... who are broken... hurt... lonely... on the other side of our door...

But that is not how the world works at the moment... This is counter intuitive... Everything we understand about our humanity... feels like it is being reduced to simply circling of the wagons... the building of walls... the ownership of borders... the reducing of welfare...

What if we did have a visit from some imaginary alien visitors... what would they say of us... existing for self... or existing for others?...

It is not a fanciful... extra terrestrial question... It is a kingdom question...

And the debate in John’s gospel with the Baptists disciples... at the beginning of the ministry of Jesus... sets the ethos of his whole ministry... Let me decrease... and let him increase... because we exist for something more than ourselves... we exist for the kingdom...

And as the new year isn't even a fortnight old... perhaps we are invited through telling this story at this point in our year... to consider our life nationally and locally and a church... and reaffirm who it is we exist for... for the kingdom... for our neighbour... for our parish...

It is why we have consulted... why we have evolved our structure... which you will not yet notice... into two areas... a faith team... designed to help us explore and develop our understanding of... and relationship with... God... and a Community Team which is exploring how we can demonstrate our love for our neighbour...

It means everything we do... moves us away from self... and towards another... towards God in faith... towards our parish in community... so that as a church... we make clear who it is we exist for... not ourselves but for others... so we shape ourselves around serving someone else... God and parish...

That's in no way saying we haven't been doing that for centuries... clearly we have... but it is a moment to remind ourselves... of John's insight to decrease self and increase the kingdom... that we exist... for and within... something greater... the reign of God...

I doubt there will be any aliens landing among us soon... What is important is not the extra-terrestrial... but our neighbour who needs to see... we don't exist for self... but for each person who lives beyond these walls... This is what it means to be a parish church... that plays its humble part in the kingdom...

## References

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