Sermon

Once upon a time an unscrupulous painter wandered into a little village. He found a quaint little church, painted white with a thatched roof, and in dire need of painting. He offered his services. The folks could hardly believe his rates – all he wanted was the price of the paint, with free room and board. They agreed, of course, and hastily prepared living quarters for him in the basement of the church. In addition, they promised to bring him hot meals, morning, noon and night.

What’s more, they paid him in advance for the paint.

He got started the next day. In two weeks he was finished, and the little church looked as good as new.

The people were so pleased they gave him a big going-away party, and a nice bonus as well.

In less than a month there came a huge downpour.

The winds blew, the rains fell and, by the next morning, there was a milky white film on the ground all around the little church. When the members got there, their hearts sank. They guessed the paint had been mixed with water. They asked the vicar what could be done. With great presence of mind he replied:

**“Repaint, repaint and thin No More.”**

John the Baptist was popular--very popular. He was Israel's first prophet in three hundred years, and people flocked to hear him. He lived in the wilderness - in the desert - in a place where there were many snakes but few people - in a place where you could die if you got lost between waterholes--and still the people came.  
  
They came in droves to hear John preach.

"Repent," he cried! "Be baptized for the forgiveness of sins!"

And they repented! And they were baptized! And they returned to the city feeling clean and pure - sometimes for the first time in many years.  
  
But then King Herod killed John.

He didn't want to because he respected him. But John criticized Herod for taking his brother's wife, and Herod's wife hated John. She and her daughter conspired to trick Herod.

After the daughter performed a cute little striptease, Herod said, "Anything you want! Up to half my kingdom!"

And the daughter said, "I want John's head!"

Herod was trapped. He didn't want to back down in front of his guests - and so he served up John's head on a platter.  
  
But still, John was popular, even after his death.

Twenty or thirty years later, in the book of Acts, Paul came across disciples of John who had never even heard of Jesus.

There were pockets of John's disciples around for decades. That just shows you how popular John was, even after his death.  
  
John tried to put himself in the right place with regard to Jesus. We see it in our Gospel lesson today. The scripture says of John that "He was not the light but was sent that he might testify about the light" (v. 8).  
  
When the priests and the Levites asked John who he was,

he told them who he **wasn't**. He said,

"I am not the Christ" (v. 20).

Obviously, somebody thought that he was the Messiah, and he was trying to kill that idea dead as a doornail.

"Who are you?" "I am NOT the Christ! NOT! Did you get that! NOT the Messiah!"  
  
They asked him if he were Elijah, and he said "NO!" They asked if he were the prophet, and he said "NO!"  
  
Well then, who are you?

**"I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness,**

**'Make straight the way of the Lord'" (v. 23).**

That's my job! That's my mission! That's my purpose in life!

The Lord is coming, and my job is to get people ready for him!  
  
He called people to repent, to confess their sins, and to be baptized.

When **Jesus** came, he would add to what John had done.

Jesus would add the gift of the **Holy Spirit**.

Then things would really happen! Jesus, helped by Spirit-gifted people, would change the world.

If John could tell us who he is by saying who he was not, perhaps we could use this for describing Jesus.

Firstly, we will say that Jesus was not ‘ a great teacher.

Many people will argue that Jesus was not the Son of God, but will admit that he was a great teacher. I think it was C.S. Lewis who pointed out the folly of such logic. Jesus said, “I and the Father are one”

He was not **just** a human being.

None of us are virgin born. The people who lived with him day by day came to the conclusion that this was not just another human being. Peter blurted out, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!” They realized he was not just human.

“He was not the **expected** Messiah.” he was not the Messiah the people expected. The Bible goes to great lengths to make that point. They expected a military Messiah who would overthrow the Roman government, but Jesus was not that Messiah. They expected a Messiah who would re-establish Israel in the greatness of David, but Jesus was not that Messiah. He was not the expected Messiah.

Instead, he was a Suffering Servant.

We might go on to describe people of our Faith.

Christians are not **afraid**

Christians are not **alone.**

Christians are not **without faith**.

Christians are not **without hope**

Christians are not **without love**

Christians are not **lost.**

Christians are not **condemned**

To return to our reading from today’s Gospel,  
It occurred to me as I read this story that we, the church need to be doing exactly what John was doing.

**We** need to be testifying to the light - pointing to Jesus - making sure that people see Jesus.

We need to make straight the way of the Lord.

We need to prepare people to **know** Jesus.

We need to call people to repent, to be baptized, and to confess their sins.

**That's our mission.**  
We, the church, are always tempted to forget that. We are tempted to get involved with other things and to push Jesus off to the side. We are tempted to put second things first and first things second - because the church's secondary things are also important:

* Feeding the hungry is important, and the church does a lot of that - but it is one of our secondary tasks.
* Housing the homeless is important, and the church does a lot of that--but it is one of our secondary tasks.
* Building schools where schools are needed is important, and the church does a lot of that--but that is one of our secondary tasks.
* Promoting racial harmony is important, and the church does a lot of that--but that is one of our secondary tasks.

Sometimes we, the church, forget that our first task is to witness to Christ.

When the church becomes primarily a soup kitchen - or a homeless shelter - or a counselling -or a place to meet nice people - or a concert hall - or a rummage sale - or anything else - it starts to die.

Our first task is to witness to Christ.

When we fail to do that, Christ lets us wither on the vine.  
  
In the last few decades, mainline churches have lost millions of members. A few years ago, Hadaway and Roozen did a careful study of growing and declining churches.

They concluded:

**"To grow and to continue growing,  
it is necessary for each mainstream church  
to become a vital religious institution,  
vibrant with the presence of God.**  
  
**It must develop a clear religious identity,  
a compelling religious purpose,  
and a coherent sense of direction,**

**that arises from that purpose"**

We might say thar mainline churches have declined over the past few decades because we took our eye off the ball.

We put second things first and first things second.

We need to recover our sense of mission,

**Now here's the tricky part.**

One of the ways that we witness to Christ is to meet the needs of vulnerable people.

When we do those things, we show forth Christ's love, and we bear witness to Christ. Christ calls us to do those things, and we often do them well. We must continue to do them.   
But we must always remember that our first task is to witness to Christ through word and sacrament - through preaching, Eucharist, and baptism. If we do this, Christ will bless us and will make it possible for us to do the other things as well.

If we fail to witness to Christ we will die.

The phrase**, "bright morning star"** came to my mind as I prepared this sermon, because I knew somehow that it was speaking of Jesus as the brightest star in the heavens.

In the book of Revelation, Jesus says**,**

**"I am the root and the offspring of David;**

**the Bright and Morning Star."** (Revelation 22:16).  
  
When we look to the East about 5 o’clock in the morning the bright morning star dominates the sky. It is the planet Venus and while the stars are tiny flecks of light, the morning star is like the landing light of a great airliner, a brilliant diamond on a black field, surrounded by flecks of diamond dust.  
  
Jesus says, **"I am the Bright and Morning star."** He is the brightest light in the sky. He is the centre of everything that we do as the church.

If we turn our backs on Jesus, our sky grows dark.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talked about all the things that we worry about--what we will eat or what we will drink or what we will wear. Then he talks about God providing all these things, even for the birds of the air - and he assures us that we are more important to God than the birds. He tells us not to worry and concludes by saying:  
**"But seek first God's Kingdom, and his righteousness;  
and all these things will be given to you as well"**

In the church, we sometimes worry about a thousand things, all the way from feeding the hungry down to the colour of the carpet. Let us, for the sake of Christ's kingdom, keep focused on the big thing, our witness to Christ through word and sacrament, trusting that God will then make it possible for us to do everything else that he wants us to do.