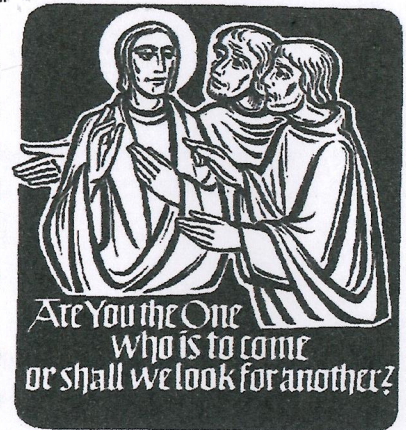


Who is this?

Who is this? This is the first thing to certify in any contact: *Who is this person who comes to me, speaks to me, writes to me?* The first thought in our minds is the identity of the person who approaches us. When I lift the letters from the postbox in the morning, I have a quick look through them to see if I recognise any of the handwriting to see who is writing to me before actually opening any of them.

In this Sunday's gospel, the question is: Who is this person called *The Baptist*? Is he the Anointed One, the Christ? Is he Elijah? John describes himself in terms of the mission given him by God: *I am the one sent to prepare the way of the Lord.* Jesus would later talk of John as *the greatest of those born of women.*



John came from a rural priestly family. He used abrasive language and stern imagery to call the people to change. But the baptism John offered was a new rite of conversion and a symbol of forgiveness, washing rituals being part of most major religions. John was placing God at the centre of things, and everything else, temple, sacrifice, ritual, was all relative to that. One thing for John was decisive: a truer and new conversion to God. John wasn't trying to plunge his people into despair, he was offering a baptism for the forgiveness of sins, and so, in the biblical tradition he was that *voice crying in the wilderness, preparing the way of the Lord.*

John becomes the key *witness who speaks for the light*, the light who is Christ the Messiah. In the mystery of the Christmas feast which approaches, this light, Jesus, comes to *pitch his tent among us* and reconcile us to God; the Baptism he offers is the Baptism of the Holy Spirit which in turn makes us *witnesses to speak for the light.* It is natural then that we too should be asked the question, *Who are you?* Jesus was asked this question, and, like John the Baptist he replied in terms of his mission and the promises made by God long ago. He used these words in the opening sermon of his ministry, in the synagogue at Nazareth where he had been brought up. They were first on the lips of Isaiah the prophet, as we hear this Sunday. Jesus made these words his own, and they form the very backdrop to his ministry:

*The Lord has anointed me.
He has sent me to bring good news to the poor,
to heal the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to captives and freedom for prisoners.*

So what answer can we give those who ask us what we are about as Christians?



**PREPARE
THE
WAY
FOR
THE
LORD,**

**SMOOTHEN
THE PATH
FOR OUR GOD**

Just as the Holy Spirit put words into the mouths of John the Baptist and Jesus, the same Spirit offers us words when we do not know how to respond. We too are part of the ancient plan of God to bring his peace love, salvation, to the world. These words of Isaiah can be the cry of the Christian disciple today, for God's plan and mission have not changed.

For this God has anointed us, (Christened us!); for this, the Spirit of the Lord has come upon us. When we were Baptised (Christened) we were anointed as prophets to bring the good news, to heal the broken-hearted, to proclaim the freedom God brings to all who are not free. We stand with Isaiah, with John the Baptist and with the Christ and say we keep company with them, we are one with them, and we share that mission.