

## **Second Sunday of Epiphany 2016**

### **John 1: 29 – 42**

“My personal characteristic of which I am most proud is the fact that I am such an amazingly humble person! In fact, I think I am the most humble person I know!”

Well, as soon as you put it like that, it shows how preposterous it is to parade your own humility. Humility is an enormous and a complex subject. I can't possibly explore it exhaustively in the course of a sermon. Suffice it to say that, when properly understood, humility is a virtue. And, of course, self-deprecation can be a particularly endearing and typically British trait.

Nevertheless, the assertion of humility as a virtue can be problematic. It can be used as a manipulative tool to create second class people. And Christians have an appalling track record when it comes to this. Christians have condoned slavery. Christians have

condoned Apartheid in South Africa. In two weeks' time we shall have the perennial problem on Mothering Sunday of being faced with Bible readings that celebrate women as those who look after others at the expense of their own self-identity. And, of course, what is at the front of my mind today is what happened at the meeting of the Primates of the Anglican Communion in Canterbury last week.

The Episcopal Church of the United States has been made a second class member of the Anglican Communion. For three years it will not be allowed to take a full part or vote in meetings of the Anglican Communion; it will not be allowed to represent the Anglican Communion in any inter-denominational or interfaith dialogue. The Episcopal Church have been made second class Anglicans because they affirm and include those of us who are gay: they bless and sacralise gay relationships; and they fully embrace the vocations of gay priests and bishops.

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By making the Episcopal Church second class Anglicans, the Primates have made it unequivocally clear that they consider LGBT Christians to be second class Christians. And no words of apology from the Archbishop of Canterbury for the discrimination LGBT Christians have suffered from the church can undo the clarity with which the Primates' message has been sent.

And if it's the case that LGBT Christians are meant to exercise humility by accepting being dismissed as second class for three years whilst attempts at reconciliation are made, that just once again confuses humility with humiliation. Humility can be a dangerous thing, so we need to exercise caution when we meet it.

And in the light of that, alarm bells start ringing when in this evening's Gospel reading we find the Evangelist of St. John's Gospel using the John the Baptist's humility as a foil with which to emphasise the

supremacy of Jesus. Earlier in the chapter, before this evening's Gospel begins, John has described himself as not worthy of untying Jesus' sandals. And in this passage he stresses that Jesus ranks ahead of him; and disclaims any personal credit for recognising who Jesus is – it was a matter of revelation to him by God.

There is, of course, an element of that endearing self-deprecating quality to the way John the Baptist speaks. But his humility should not be used as an excuse for the sort of humility forced upon women and LGBT Christians. Sequence is the key to understanding why not. John is second class to Jesus because his ministry is merely a preparation for Jesus'. It precedes it and Jesus then comes after him. And with Jesus comes the Holy Spirit.

All four Gospels have some form of story of the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus in the form of a dove at his Baptism. There are nuanced differences between those stories. And what is distinctive about the

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Evangelist's story in the fourth Gospel is that John testifies, not just that the Spirit descends on Jesus, but remains with him; and it is by the Spirit remaining on him that Jesus can then baptise with the Holy Spirit; and that is what contrasts with John's own anterior and, if you like, inferior ministry.

That inferiority, that second class nature of John's ministry – and the humility with which he recognises it – is superseded by the baptism that Jesus offers. Christian baptism is baptism in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Those who are baptised become one in Christ and therefore the Holy Spirit remains in them, just as John testified it remained in Jesus. There therefore can be no second class Christians. And if there can be no second class Christians, surely there can be no second class Anglicans.

Amen.