

The Benefice of Stoke-by-Nayland, with Leavenheath and Polstead and Nayland with Wissington (Wiston)

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Strangers in our midst – 3rd Sunday of Advent (Gaudete Sunday)

"Among you stands one whom you do not know." Those are John's words to the religious authorities who come to him. They are his words to us today.

In the past I have often heard John's words as a criticism. It's as if John is saying, "I've been pointing to the one and all you do is look at my finger. I have been talking about the one and you let my words go in one ear and out the other. You are not looking. You are not listening. You do not know the one who stands among you."

But recently I have been wondering if John's words are neither criticism nor rebuke? What if his words are an invitation to wonder, to ponder, to consider anew the possibilities of who this one might be? I say that because John himself did not know the one. In subsequent verses not included in today's reading John says twice, "I myself did not know him" (John 1:31, 33). John only recognised the one when he saw the spirit descend and remain (John 1:32-34). So who is this one? What do you think? Who is John referring to?

Most of us would probably say Jesus. That's the usual answer, the usual way of hearing John's words and indeed it is the answer I've most often given. But today I want us to rethink the usual answer. Is Jesus the one and only or could there be others? Have there been others before Jesus? Will there be others after Jesus? I want us to hear John's words in a larger context. I want us to consider that maybe we sometimes focus so much on Jesus that we lose the gospel, and the messenger overshadows the message.

Could this one who stands among us be you? Me? A stranger on the street?

Let me be clear. I am not suggesting that Jesus is the wrong answer. I am just wondering if there might be more than one right answer. What if John is not referring to the one as a numerical limitation or an exclusion of all others but as an exemplar? What if John is referring to the way the particular points to the universal? What if this one is archetypal of the many? After all, the Christian tradition has never held the one and the many as mutually exclusive. To the contrary, it is an important part of our faith. We believe in one God; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

What if John is saying to us that this one has always been among and still is? That would be a more literal translation of the Greek. The grammar suggests that this one has stood among us in the past and continues to do so now. It also suggests that we did not recognise the one then and we still do not now.

And that raises a good question. Why don't we recognise the one who stands among us?

Maybe the greatest barrier to seeing the divine presence among us is that we already have an idea or image of who that one is or should be and what that one should look like and do. In other words, we think we know and we stick with what we think we know. We cannot see the one because he or she does not meet our expectations or fit our categories of who he or she can be. Sometimes, we do not see the one among us because he or she stands outside the box of our beliefs. And more often than not we see and hear in such a way that it only confirms what we already believe.

That's what the priests and Levites are doing with John. They come to him with the usual answers of who he should be; the Messiah, Elijah, the prophet. But he won't allow them to do that to him. He doesn't fit their

expectations or categories. They do not know the one who stands among them. Sometimes we just don't see the one who stands among.

John is not announcing something new. He says as much. "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said". Before John there was Isaiah. And don't think John was the first to see the spirit descend upon the one. It also came upon Isaiah. He says: "*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners*" (Isaiah 61:1).

Wherever these spirit kinds of things are happening they point to one who stands among us. And more often than not we only recognise the one in retrospect. Who has been one that stood among you and made the divine present? When have you looked back and seen that one doing some kind of spirit thing in your life? And when have you been that one for another?

"Among you stands one whom you do not know." So, who is this one? What do you think? Who is John referring to? Yes, it is Jesus. And yes, it was John and Isaiah. And yes, it can be you and me.

And that is not a negation or diminishment of who Jesus is or what he has done. It is rather, a fulfilment of who he is and what he has done. I am not saying anything Jesus himself did not first say. "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these" (John 14:12).

"Among you stands one whom you do not know." Words of hope. Words of promise. Words of God's faithfulness.

Mark

Of your kindness and charity, please pray for all those who have recently died and for the families who mourn their loss, including from within our own benefice:

- Ruby Warren (*Polstead – 16th December 2020 at 11.30am in St Mary's, Polstead*)
- Frances Norton (*Nayland – 17th December 2020 at 2pm in Colchester Crematorium*)
- Matilda 'Tilly' Beales (*Stoke – 29th December 2020 at 12.30pm in St Mary's, Stoke*)
- Keith Price (*Stoke – 30th December 2020 at 10.15am in St Mary's, Stoke*)

Please pray for our own Diocese and for our Bishops, Archdeacons, and Administrative and Support Staff. For our sister Diocese of Kagera in Tanzania. For our postmen and women, delivery drivers, and all who work in warehouses and distribution.

Christmas Helping Hand 2020



Thank you to everyone who has already supported Revd Mark's Christmas "Helping Hand" appeal to help the most vulnerable in our community have a more enjoyable and comfortable Christmas. If you are in the fortunate position to help, perhaps you receive a winter fuel payment that you do not really need, if so, why not pass it on to someone who does? Or perhaps you are scaling back your own Christmas Celebrations this year, if so perhaps you might consider giving some of the money you will save to help an individual or family have a really good Christmas this year?

You can do so online using the following Link: <https://gf.me/u/y8j58i>

Alternatively, if you would prefer you can post a cash donation in a sealed envelope through the letterbox at the Vicarage (please mark your envelope "**Christmas Helping Hand**")

'TIS THE SEASON OF GIVING

HOLIDAY FOOD DRIVE



Thank you to everyone for supporting the Community Pantry especially with donations of seasonal items!

The following items are always needed:

- UHT Milk (*not Skimmed*)
- Instant Coffee & Tea Bags
- Toilet Rolls & Toothpaste
- Laundry Detergent "Pods"
- Packets of Microwave Rice
- Instant &/or Pot Noodles
- Jars of Cheesy Pasta Sauces
- Jars of Cooking Sauces (Chinese/Curry/Mexican)
- Tins of Stews & Mince
- Tins of Curry
- Tins of Chili con Carne
- Cup-a-soups
- Loaves of Bread

Thanks to gift from a parishioner, we now have sufficient Christmas Crackers, Mince Pies & Christmas Puddings

Alternatively, if you would prefer to support financially, then you can post a cash donation in a sealed envelope through the letterbox at the Vicarage (please mark your envelope "**Community Pantry**")



DETAILS OF SERVICES IN CHURCH AND ONLINE ARE BEGINNING TO BE MADE AVAILABLE AT:

www.naylandchurches.wordpress.com/christmas

You can also access online services from The Church of England, download the free **#ComfortAndJoy** App where you can hear again the message of the angels - good news of God's unfailing love for a world that is weary and hurting at:

www.churchofengland.org/ComfortAndJoy



Today, Sunday 13th December at 9am – National Online Christingle Service

country.

The Children's Society warmly invite you to join them for their first ever National Online Christingle Service. This will be streamed on the Church of England's website, Facebook and YouTube channels and it would be great if you tuned in to share the light with the whole

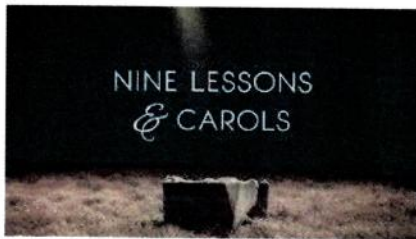
The service will include a few words from HRH The Duchess of Gloucester, the Archbishop of Canterbury who will be lighting the Advent Candle, as well as the Children's Societies Vice-Chair of Trustees, the Bishop of Derby Libby Lane. There will also be a special performance from soprano Joanna Forest, and of course the opportunity to join young people lighting the Christingles. It is set to be a magical event.



Doorstep Carols **Wednesday 16th December 2020 at 6pm**

In conjunction with BBC Radio Suffolk, why not join in with neighbours and friends and sing Christmas Carols safely from your own doorstep!

You can download a carol sheet (and for the musically talented sheet music as well!) from www.doorstepcarols.co.uk and then simply tune in to BBC Radio Suffolk who will be broadcasting the carols for everyone to sing along to.



Saturday 19th December 2020 at 6.30pm - Online

As we cannot enjoy our usual festival of carols and readings, Revd Mark has put together a special online service with a mix of traditional and contemporary Christmas carols for everyone to listen to and join in with from their own homes, whilst recalling the story of humanity from the Fall in the Garden of Eden through to Christ's birth.

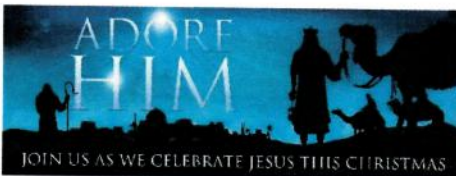
This service will be available on the Benefice Facebook Page, YouTube Page, with links from our Benefice website.



Christmas Eve - 24th December 2020 at 11.30pm **Midnight Mass (The First Eucharist of Christmas)** **St James' Church, Nayland and Online**

Christmas begins with our Midnight Mass Service. This year we will have both an Online Service and a small in person service in St James. Due to current COVID guidance numbers at the service in St James' will be strictly limited, and sadly there can be no congregational singing (if you wish to attend please contact Kath or Chris Hunt).

Our online service will be available to all and will include the traditional Christmas Carols for you to join in with, safely from your own homes. All our online services will be available on the Benefice Facebook Page, YouTube Page, with links from our Benefice website.



Christmas Day - 25th December 2020 at 11am **Holy Communion** **St Mary's Church, Stoke-by-Nayland and Online**

Christmas continues with our Celebratory Christmas Day Service. This year we will have both an Online Service and a small in person service in St Mary's. Due to current COVID guidance numbers at the service in St Mary's will be strictly limited, and sadly there can be no congregational singing (if you wish to attend this service please contact June Smith).

Our online service will of course be available to everyone, and because you can do so safely from your own homes, we are able to include some traditional Christmas Carols to get you into that festive mood. All our online services will be available on the Benefice Facebook Page, YouTube Page, with links from the benefice website.

COLLECT

O Lord Jesus Christ,
 who at your first coming sent your
 messenger
 to prepare your way before you:
 grant that the ministers and stewards of
 your mysteries
 may likewise so prepare and make ready
 your way
 by turning the hearts of the disobedient to
 the wisdom of the just,
 that at your second coming to judge the
 world
 we may be found an acceptable people in
 your sight;
 for you are alive and reign with the Father
 in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
 one God, now and for ever.

FIRST READING

Isaiah 61:1-4. 8-11

A reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah.

The servant of the LORD said: The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion – to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory. They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. For I the LORD love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed. I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and

as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

PSALM OR CANTICLE

Either Psalm 126

R *The Lord has done great things for us.*

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
 then were we like those who dream.
 Then was our mouth filled with laughter
 and our tongue with songs of joy. **R**

Then said they among the nations,
 "The Lord has done great things for them."
 The Lord has indeed done great things for us,
 and therefore we rejoiced. **R**

Restore again our fortunes, O Lord,
 as the river beds of the desert.
 Those who sow in tears
 shall reap with songs of joy.
 Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed,
 will come back with shouts of joy,
 bearing their sheaves with them. **R**

Or Luke 1:46b-55

R *My spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.*

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord;
 My spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.
 For he has looked with favour on his lowly servant;
 from this day all generations will call me blessed.
 The Almighty has done great things for me,
 and holy is his name. **R**

He has mercy on those who fear him in every generation.
 He has shown the strength of his arm;
 he has scattered the proud in their conceit. **R**

He has cast down the mighty from their thrones
 and has lifted up the lowly.
 He has filled the hungry with good things
 and the rich he has sent away empty. **R**

He has come to the help of his servant, Israel,
 for he has remembered his promise of mercy.
 The promise he made to our forebears:
 to Abraham and his children for ever. **R**

SECOND READING

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

A reading from the first letter of Paul to the Thessalonians.

My brothers and sisters, rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil. May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

GOSPEL John 1:6-8. 19-28

Hear the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to John.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

POST COMMUNION

We give you thanks, O Lord, for these heavenly gifts;
 kindle in us the fire of your Spirit
 that when your Christ comes again
 we may shine as lights before his face;
 who is alive and reigns now and for ever.

