

# Pointing to the Light

(John 1:6-8; 19-28)

One of the most famous pianists of the second half of the twentieth century was Van Cliburn, who won the 1958 Tchaikovsky Piano Competition in Moscow. Many people have heard of him because of the illustrious career that resulted from winning this premier piano competition. However not many people have heard of Liu Chi Kung, who finished second to Van Cliburn that year. Liu was from China, and returned to China after the competition. During the Cultural Revolution, when Red Guards turned their wrath on intellectuals and artists, Liu was imprisoned for six years.

Soon after his release from prison, critics wrote that Liu's music was better than ever. One critic asked, "How did you do this? You had no chance to practice for six years." Liu replied, "I did practice, every day. I rehearsed every piece I had ever played, note by note, in my mind."

Liu had a single-minded focus. It is the kind of single-minded focus John the Baptist had toward his work of preparing people to meet Jesus. And it is the kind of focus we are to have as witnesses to Jesus. In the gospel for this morning we are told at verse 8 John wasn't the light but came to bear witness to the light Jesus.

On Friday morning I was thinking about this image as I walked my dog before sunrise. I looked up into the sky and saw the Bright Morning Star. In the Revelation of John we read Jesus say the following in chapter 22:16 "I am the Bright Morning Star". This is the last image used in the Bible to describe Jesus. It is helpful to know this because in the Gospel, written by the same author, light is used to describe Jesus in the opening paragraph. This reference to the Morning Star is made implicitly in John 1:5 where we read: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

Let's think about the Morning Star for a minute.

The Morning Star isn't a star at all. It's the planet Venus. No matter the name, the Bright Morning Star dominates the eastern sky. While the stars are tiny flecks of light, the Morning Star is like the landing light of a great airliner -- a

bright, megawatt lamp that shines as bright as all the other stars put together. It is a brilliant diamond on a black field, surrounded by flecks of diamond dust.

As I walked in the park the other morning I looked at it repeatedly as it hung there in the eastern sky. It was the only light in that part of the sky. When in Revelation Jesus says, "I am the Bright Morning Star", John wants us to recognize that he is the brightest light in the sky. He is the centre of everything. If we turn our backs on Jesus, our sky grows dark. Advent calls us to keep ourselves focused on Jesus and to see our primary calling as Christians to be that of pointing others to the light, Jesus Christ.

To help us better understand how we are to witness to Jesus we will take the next couple of minutes to look at verses 6-8 of John chapter one.

1. As we study these verses we recognize that like John the Baptist we are called to be martyrs for Jesus. At verse 6 we read "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7He came as a witness (Greek noun: marturian) to testify (Greek verb: marturese) to the light, so that all (Greek: pantes -- all, everyone) might believe through him. 8He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light."

Often people think that a martyr is someone who gives up his or her life for Jesus. Of course, in the fullest sense of this word, that does happen. John the Baptist was martyred at the hands of King Harrod and countless others down through the centuries have lost their lives because they have declared that Jesus is the Bright Morning Star. However at its heart the word martyr means "a witness." If you look at verses seven and eight both the Greek noun and verb of this word are used. The noun is at verse seven "witness" and the verb follows immediately after "to testify". Then the writer John tells us why the Baptist was a Martyr "so that all might believe through John's witness" that Jesus is the light shining in the darkness.

2. John the Baptist sets the example for us as to how we live as witnesses for Jesus.

a) First of all he shows us that we are to live sub-ordinate to Jesus. Verse 6 says that John was sent from God. In this Gospel, only John and Jesus are sent from God, but John is clearly subordinate to Jesus. In John's Gospel account

every reference to John is a reference where he is less than Jesus. John "was not the light, but came to testify to the light" (v. 8). He confesses, "I am not the Messiah" (v. 20). He is not Elijah or the prophet (v. 21). He cries in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord" (v. 23). He is "not worthy to untie the thong of Jesus' sandal" (v. 27).

As we learn to follow John's example we too we live under Jesus. We live consciously aware of the supremacy of Jesus. But we make this choice in the world that does not want to hear that we are to live under Christ because the world does not see him. Please look at verse 10. There the writer John tells us "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him". Then at verse 26 John the Baptist witnesses to the Pharisees with these words "Among you stands one whom you do not know." I find this phrase evocative of another phrase taken from Revelation 3:20 where Jesus says: "Listen, I am standing at the door knocking; If you hear my voice and open I will come into you and eat with you and you with me." Witnesses for Jesus are people who know him and live in such a way that we help others to hear Jesus knocking. This is so that the one they did not know they will come to know as he enters into their lives. As people do this and open the door to him he does come in and this results in communion with Jesus.

Do you know this communion with him? Every Sunday we enact this verse as we share in the sacrament of bread and wine. As we gather around the altar it is so that we may come to know him more. As we kneel to receive the bread and wine we place ourselves with John as witnesses subordinate to Jesus. As we then stand up and turn around we are going out into the world so that the One whose life we have shared in around the altar we will now share in the world as we point others to the light.

b) As we take this to heart we will realize that our witness really does matter, which is the second insight we learn from John the Baptist. John "came as a witness to testify to the light" (v. 7). As noted above, the words "witness" and "testify" come from the same root. Both are commonly used in legal settings. In a courtroom, witnesses help to establish guilt or innocence by their testimony. The purpose of their testimony is to witness to that of which they have personal knowledge so that a judge or jury can rightly determine truth. It is hard to overstate the importance of these words, "witness" and "testimony," in this Gospel. The noun occurs fifteen times, the verb over thirty times.

I would like to end today by sharing a story of a boy whose name is not known whose witness moved the heart of a Soviet Officer during the days of Communism:

"What is it?" Soviet captain Marco snarled at the young boy. "What do you want?" The boy, only twelve, swallowed his fear as he stood before the Communist officer. "Captain, you are the man who put my parents in prison. Today is my mother's birthday, and I always buy her flowers for her birthday.

Since my mother taught me to love my enemies and to reward evil with good, I have brought the flowers instead for the mother of your children. Please take them home to your wife tonight, and tell her about my love and the love of Christ.

Captain Marco, who had watched unmoved as Christians had been unmercifully beaten and tortured, was stunned by the act of love of this boy. His tears fell as he slowly walked around the desk and grabbed the boy in a fatherly embrace. Marco's heart was changed by the gift of Christ's love. He could no longer arrest and torture Christians and soon he himself was arrested.

Only months after the boy's visit to his office, Marco slumped in a filthy prison cell surrounded by some of the same Christians he had previously arrested and tortured. He tearfully told his cell-mates of the young boy and the simple gift of a flower.

Here was a boy who pointed to the light by placing himself under Jesus and so made real to Captain Marco Jesus, the light shining in the darkness, the Bright Morning Star.

Like John and this boy we are to point to the light this week by living as martyrs for Jesus.