

## John the Not

### *David Wilbourne's sermon for Advent III*

I can tell those who've been to the Arts Centre Panto  
by the fact you're not sitting at the end of a pew.

Don't worry – you're safe here!

Or are you?

Are you safe in this Advent place?

In the words of the poet Annie Dilliard:

'The sleeping God may wake some day and take offence;

Or the waking God may draw us

to where we can never return.'

Our Gospel this morning had a panto element about it.

John playing Guess who I am!

John: not the Christ;

John: not Elijah;

John: not the prophet.

John: infuriatingly elusive.

His enemies wanting a name, a title,

so they could pin him down,

categorise him,

so they could say:

'Now we have him,

now we know what he's about,

now we can counter him:

now we can disregard him!'

They wanted a name

but all they got was a voice,

because John the Not was having none of it.

And if the forerunner was so elusive,

how much more elusive would the Coming One be.

Ironic, really,  
setting this Gospel so near Christmas,  
because Christmas to the world  
is not so much about elusiveness  
but about concrete events:  
a birth  
at a certain time  
in a certain place  
to a certain woman,  
looked on by a certain cocktail  
of shepherds, animals, angels, wise men  
and portrait painters!  
And the doctrines themselves  
seem riddled with certainties,  
belted out in carols galore.  
God-made-man,  
the incarnate deity,

Jesus, God-with-us:  
God's human face.  
All so pat.  
Now we have him.  
Now we know what this God's about.  
Now we can disregard him.  
Except that we can't.  
This morning's Gospel is a powerful reminder  
that God's an elusive fellow.  
'He is such a fast God,  
always before us and leaving as we arrive'  
claims the poet priest R S Thomas in his *Pilgrimages*.  
My favourite religious book when I was a boy –  
and it wasn't a big short list –  
was the *Fourth Wise Man*,  
about the Magus who was too late,

too late for the birth,  
to late for the childhood,  
too late for the ministry,  
too late for the healings and the miracles.

But on time at last  
for Calvary and Resurrection.

I always felt he was the wisest man,  
always missing God by a whisker.

Because when we try to constrain God  
to a cradle or a cross or a church  
or anything else,  
we lose him.

‘He is not here, he is risen,’  
should ever be before us.

Those two words

Not here,

summing up Via Negativa,  
defining God by what he is not,  
or rather  
allowing God to be God.

God is defined as the one who cannot be tied down.

I am struck by the account of Christmas  
in one of the apocryphal Gospels,  
the Proto-Gospel of James.

The book has a strange genre,  
Gnostic,  
veering between impersonal narration  
and personal reflection by Joseph:

‘And Joseph found a cave and brought Mary into it  
and went out to seek a Hebrew midwife  
in the region of Bethlehem.

Now I Joseph was walking,  
and yet I did not walk,  
and looked up to the air  
and saw the air in amazement.  
And I looked up to the vault of heaven,  
and saw it standing still,  
and the birds of heaven motionless.  
And I looked at the earth  
and saw a dish placed there  
with workmen lying around it,  
with their hands in the dish.  
But those who chewed  
did not chew,  
and those who lifted up anything  
lifted up nothing,  
and those who put something to their mouth  
put nothing in.

But all had their faces turned upwards.  
And behold sheep were being driven  
but did not come forward,  
but stood still.  
And the shepherd raised his hand  
to strike them with his staff,  
but his hand remained up.  
And I looked at the flow of the river  
which did not flow,  
and saw the mouths of the kids over it,  
but they did not drink.  
And then all at once everything went on its course.'  
Silent night,  
Holy Night,  
Stille Nacht – still night.  
On the night when Christ was born

the whole world literally stops

and pauses

and catches its breath.

I feel sorry for John the Baptist,

forerunning for two millennia.

But if John the Baptist's elusiveness

can make us pause this Christmas

in sheer wonder

at the elusive One born into our midst

far greater than he,

then he will not have forerun in vain.

May the sleeping God wake this Christmas

and take offence;

And may the waking God draw us

to where we can never return...

Pantomimes are so much safer than Church!