

## **HE MUST GROW GREATER, I MUST GROW LESS**

Advent II, Norwich Cathedral, Sunday December 7<sup>th</sup> 2014

Many years ago now – in fact my first job after my curacy – saw me teaching at Lincoln Theological College. I was in my study listening to a student's essay when there was a furtive knock on my study door. The student came in and sheepishly said: 'There's someone downstairs says he wants to see you – says you'll know.' I said, 'Fine, just bring him up.' 'Well, I'm not sure', continued the student, 'I think he may be what my mother calls "a man of the road."' 'A tramp', I rather insensitively responded.

I went downstairs and there was this quite extraordinary figure – lace up boots, a light blue denim habit tucked up into his trouser belt and hair that appeared not to have seen a comb for some weeks: 'Hello, I'm Roland Walls', he said. 'I think you're expecting me?' I was indeed expecting him but not quite expecting him to look like this! Roland had come to lead a quiet day. He was a remarkable person by any standards. Double first at Cambridge and Fellow of Corpus Christi College, Tutor in theology, he then went on to teach ordinands in Sheffield, rooted in the local community in a new and unconventional way.

Then, later, in the 1970s, while still working in Sheffield, he was travelling home on a train when he saw on the back of a passing railway truck, 'Return Empty to Scotland.' He saw it as a sign. Soon after he went back to Edinburgh where he'd once taught at New College, and now, with three others, set up the Ecumenical Community of the Transfiguration, where each of them lived as semi-hermits in hen-houses just down the road from Roslin Chapel, as in the Da Vinci Code! I begin with Roland, since he is the nearest example I have ever encountered in a contemporary figure to my picture of St John the Baptist. It is the Baptist who is in the foreground today.

John the Baptist - or John the Baptiser as he's sometimes called - the only saint in the western calendar who died before Jesus - is a more than unusual figure. Mark, in his gospel, makes

him still more breathtakingly unusual by introducing him on to the screen of the gospel with scarcely any warning and right at the start! The gospel begins tersely: ‘The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.’ Then picking up a verse from our first reading from Isaiah, the Baptist is thrown into the foreground as in one of those cinema screen stunts which intimidates by the startling and dramatic characters thrust in front of you. Yet - still more excitement and surprise follows. For John himself says:

‘After me comes one who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.’

Personality though he clearly is, there is one greater still on the scene. So, only a few verses on - just beyond the passage we heard, despite all this the paradox increases. Now Jesus insists that - unworthy as the Baptist declares himself to be – John *must* baptise him. Of all the gospel writers, Mark is the most terse, the most aware of the tragic nature of Jesus’ path, the most enigmatic of the evangelists and the most ironic. What is all this about?

Let me return to Roland Walls, for a moment, whom the Olympian Professor Henry Chadwick once described as ‘the mole under the fence.’ I’ve never forgotten the story that Roland told during that quiet day he led for us all those years ago. He was walking down Union Street in Aberdeen and feeling weary dropped into the Franciscan Church. Seeing the statue of Francis, Roland in a fit of unworthiness, immediately left the church and made instead for the nearest café. This turned out to be *The Lite Bite*. His description of it remains vivid. ‘It was all orange’, he said, ‘Orange table tops, orange lampshades, orange walls.’ Roland was no aesthete but the kitch décor offended him. Nonetheless, buying a coffee he went away to sit quietly in a corner. Moments later in came a person still more dishevelled than Roland and plonked himself right next to him.

‘I’m just a nobody!’ he thundered out at Roland. Taken aback, Roland responded: ‘Well I suppose I’m pretty much a nobody too.’ With no chance for Roland to recover his wits, the

man echoed loudly ‘What’s the greatest thing in the world?’ Roland replied to his question. ‘Well, I suppose the creation of the world.’ The man replied, ‘No, what’s the greatest thing about the world.’ Roland tried again. ‘God’, he put forward tentatively. ‘No, no, but what’s the greatest thing?’ the man asked louder still. Roland was foxed. ‘Well,’ said the man, ‘it must be the Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ.’

Roland, who was manifestly someone of significant holiness, and who wore that holiness with humility – was further humbled. It was almost as if he’d only just begun to touch the edges of the gospel. That is precisely where we are today. John, in his gospel, as John the Baptist saying of Jesus, simply: ‘He must grow greater, I must grow less.’ For the Baptist - and this may be part of how his saintliness, his sanctity was recognised - had nothing of the ego in him. It was not about *him*, not about *me*.

Instead, Jesus, the one to whom John pointed, manifested this perfectly. For in Jesus God had emptied himself to tread the ground which we tread. I hardly need spell out the message further for *us*, for *our world*, for *our society* where celebrity and ego too easily reign supreme. Even religion is easily infected. Too many new hymns and songs begin with *me* rather than God. Yet - as Roland saw in that hideous café with his new friend, we are called to point away from ourselves. As we await the coming of Jesus, ‘He must grow greater and I must grow less.’

Amen

### Readings

Isaiah. 40. 1-11.

II Peter. 3. 8-15.

Mark. 1. 1-8.