

“Popularity Contest(ed)”

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Continuing a series on the Gospel of John

John 3.22-36

March 15, 2015

Remember when John Lennon was bigger than Jesus?

It was 1966. In an interview, the Beatle said this:

*Christianity will go away. It will vanish and shrink. I needn't argue about that; I'm right and I'll be proved right. We're more popular than Jesus now. . . .*¹

He was not far out. It really did look like Christianity was fading fast. Nowadays we know it is much more complicated.² But with churches sitting empty while The Beatles packed stadiums, I can see Lennon's point.

Some Christians agreed.³ More were enraged. The Reverend Jimmy Stroud said that youth now had an opportunity “to show Jesus Christ is more popular than The Beatles.”

I wonder what Jesus thought of all this.

II

We hear another controversy about popularity in today's Bible reading.

After this, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and was baptizing.

Now John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water, and people were coming and being baptized. (This was before John was put in prison.) There was a debate between some of John's disciples and another Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing. They came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you gave evidence about—look, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him.”

continued . . .

¹ What follows comes from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/More_popular_than_Jesus.

² In many parts of the world, Christianity is robust and growing. Even in centres of decline, such as the United Kingdom, Christianity is proving to be more resilient than its critics hoped and its supporters feared. The recent upsurge in “angry atheism” from people like Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, and Bill Maher can be attributed to frustration that Christianity, and religion in general, hasn't disappeared as once-confident secularists assumed it would.

³ The American Jesuit magazine *America* said that “Lennon was simply stating what many a Christian educator would readily admit.”

To this John replied, “A person can receive only what is given them from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.’ The bride belongs to the groom. The friend who stands by the groom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine, and it is now filled to overflowing. He must increase, and I must decrease.”

The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all. He gives evidence to what he has seen and heard, but no one accepts his evidence. Whoever has accepted it has put his signature to the fact that God is truthful. For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit. The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. Whoever is believing in the Son has deep, lasting life, but whoever is disobeying the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath weighs down on them.

John 3.22-36

Adapted from the New International Version

John’s baptizing movement is still attracting attention. He has relocated from the Jordan River, to another place with an abundance of water.⁴ An abundance of people keep coming to John. But then some of John’s followers get word. As popular as John is, “everyone” is now rushing to Jesus.⁵

John’s supporters are bothered. They are like us. We want to be part of something big and successful. We want our team to beat the Americans in hockey or curling . . . or even things that matter! We get jealous. Competitive. Our personal identity gets wrapped up in it. We feel better about ourselves if we’re with the winning side.

I wonder what Jesus thinks of all this.

III

We hear what John the Baptizer thinks. He is thrilled with his shrinking popularity, because he knows some things. They are good for us to know too.

John knows that any success he has, any blessings he receives, any work he can do is all

⁴ The Greek text identifies it as “Aenon near Salim.” *Aenon* derives from the Hebrew *ay-yin*, which means “spring.” It was likely near Wadi Fa’rah, a river valley west of the Jordan which empties into the river. A small Palestinian village is there. It is about a 90 km walk from the traditional location of Jesus’ baptism at Bethany on the east side of the Jordan. (See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%86non> and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wadi_al-Far%27a.)

⁵ John 4:33 says Jesus was baptizing, but 4:2 clarifies that it was Jesus’ disciples who were doing it on his behalf.

because of God. So it is not about his glory. He is not interested in a glowing reputation. He won't claim credit for something that is not really about him. He is a servant, totally dependent on God, and completely desiring to celebrate God. So John is free from envy.⁶ What God gives him will be enough, and very good. What God gives to someone else, including their success, John can rejoice in too.

What about us as a congregation? When another church gets notice, do we celebrate? When they grow, do we grumble? Do we wish we could be like them? Maybe that's not what God has called us to be.

Do we sometimes envy ourselves? Do we wish we could be like we used to be? Maybe what was great back then, is not what God is calling us to be now?

Let's keep John's attitude in mind as we, and as our whole United Church, go through important times of change and challenge? God's is calling us, and giving us the gifts we need, to be part of God's church here and now. It is God's gift, so it must be good.

IV

John the Baptizer knows everything is a gift from God. He also knows his role in God's work. He is the "advance man" for Jesus. His job is to get things ready. He is not the light, but the witness pointing to it. He is not the promised Messiah, but the "shout" heralding that King's arrival.⁷

John could have put himself at the centre. But that would be like the best man pushing the groom aside at the wedding. No, the groom's friend is happy to be the friend. He is delighted to stand to the side as his buddy weds. That's a good friend, doing his job well. John is perfectly content, because he knows his job. He knows where he fits. He knows it is not about him.

What a great privilege to serve beside Jesus. He has invited us together to be his church, and share in his work. We rejoice in what he is doing. We celebrate with him. We don't photo-bomb the wedding picture. It is not about us.

V

John the Baptizer says of Jesus, "*He must increase and I must decrease.*"

There is a classic painting, the Isenheim Altarpiece.⁸ Mathis Grünewald crafted it early in the 16th century. In the centre panel, we see Jesus crucified, with his pathos and agony expressed grippingly. To Jesus' left is John the Baptizer. His wash towel wraps around his waist, a symbol of both his baptizing and his role as a servant. He points to Jesus. In Latin

⁶ "The best antidote to envy is the conviction of the sovereignty of God." Frederick Dale Bruner, [The Gospel of John, A Commentary](#) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 220.

⁷ John 1.6-8,15,19-37.

⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isenheim_Altarpiece

are these words: *"illum oportet crescere me autem minui."* *"He must increase, but I must decrease."*

Historically, it is wrong. In our Scripture today it says *"John hadn't yet been thrown into prison."* That foreshadows what is coming. John will soon be arrested, imprisoned, and executed. John died well-before Jesus' crucifixion. So he wasn't there. Still, the artist includes him, because John points us to Jesus. That is John's job.

"He must increase and I must decrease." He is becoming more, so I am becoming less.

John points away from himself, to Jesus. So do we, Jesus' people. Jesus will increase, and we will decrease. We are successful as a congregation, I am successful as a pastor, all of us succeed as disciples, not when people say how good or great we are. Our success comes when the presence of Christ Jesus increases in our neighbours and neighbourhoods. Our success comes when the presence of Christ Jesus grows in our world. We succeed when he is celebrated, not us, when he is followed, not us, when his grace is known and received, when his justice and mercy are tasted and experienced. Someone put it this way: John *"believes that it is possible to be so consumed with Christ's increase that one can actually be content to be less significant ourselves."*⁹

VI

Still, even if we accept the artistic license of having John at Jesus' crucifixion, this is a strange scene.

John is saying, *"He must increase. . . ."* pointing to Jesus. Pointing to Jesus on the cross. Pointing to Jesus in agony, dying rejected, suffering and shamed. This is increasing? This is popularity? This is the best man? Our scripture today says Jesus is the one who comes from above, who comes from heaven, who is sent by God, who speaks God's words, who is above all things. This is the Son who is beloved by the Father, and into whose hands the Father gives everything.

This is him, Jesus on the cross.

For, as it also says, *"no one accepts his evidence,"* his testimony, his witness to God. *"He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him."*¹⁰

John Lennon might have been more popular than Jesus. I wonder if Jesus cares. Instead of screaming fans, he took the way to the cross, lined by weeping women.

We can strive for popularity. Yet we follow the One who was more intent on saving the world. Amen.

⁹ Bruner, 221.

¹⁰ John 1.10-11.