

Five kilometres south of the Scottish Border on the north-west corner of England lies the city of Carlisle. It isn't, by any standards, a big city with a population of 75,000 but it is in a key strategic location lying at the western end of Hadrian's wall. The castle in Carlisle was built around 1092 and in it, you will find a small cell in which a Border chieftain was once imprisoned. He was in that cell for many years - his only comfort being the light which came in through a small high window; a window too high to look out of while standing on the floor. On the ledge of the window are two depressions where the stone was worn away by the hands of that chieftain where he would, every day, lift himself up to look out at the green dales across which he would never ride again. A similar situation faced the Baptist, John.

John was in prison. He'd been wandering about prophesying, baptising and generally rubbing the religious and political leaders up the wrong way. No doubt the Jewish leaders had it in for him when he called them a "brood of vipers", but they couldn't do a lot with this odd fellow who wandered around wearing camel hair shirts and eating food that Bush Tucker Man would have a hard time digesting. I'm sure he'd have remained a thorn in the flesh for them had he not overstepped the mark and got involved in the politics of the day. However, it was when he overstepped the mark and started telling the ruler, Herod Antipas that he was a naughty boy.

Herod had divorced his wife, and remarried – this time it was his half-brother's wife (or his sister-in-law) Herodias. Her daughter (Herod's stepdaughter and half niece) Salome subsequently danced so well for Herod so well that he promised anything up to half his kingdom as a reward (which, if nothing else, shows it must have been one heck of a dance!). Herodias prompted Salome to ask for John the Baptist's head as a reward which must have been quite a let down to Salome (and I suspect John wasn't too happy about it either). All that was still to come though; Herod was keeping John alive because he liked to listen to him (though he was sometimes disturbed by what he heard).

As he languished in prison, John had time on his hands. His ministry had been cut short even though he had achieved its goal of pointing the way to the one who was to come. But humans have an insatiable curiosity and it's one that can be illustrated by means of a story....

The story concerns two Irishmen who one day, over a few pints of Guinness, had a bet in a Dublin pub in the 1780's. One bet the other that he could introduce a new word into the English language within a week. Have you ever tried to introduce a new word? How would you go about it? The two continued to drink Guinness and the bet was sealed. That night, one of them went all around that city and scrawled a word on every wall, doorway or fence he could find in letters large and small. The same word throughout the entire city. Not a blank space was left until the residents woke and could hardly miss this one word that was everywhere.

Quiz!

The new word, quiz adorned every building. Who put it there? Why? What could it mean? And so the first quiz was born.

In the main, people love quizzes. Whether it be the Chase, Mastermind or Pointless (not certain you get all of those here), we all enjoy trying to get the answers before the contestants. We are a naturally inquisitive species. A recent study has shown that the average 3-year-old asks over three hundred questions a day – most of them being "why?". With that knowledge under our belts, we are not too surprised that John the Baptist had his questions too. John must have wondered on those long dark nights whether Jesus was continuing that work and if so how? It would have taken an angel not to entertain such thoughts and John

was very human. That's why he sent a delegation to ask his younger cousin whether he *was* the Messiah.

Jesus understood John's need for answers to the questions he posed and it did not change our Lord's feeling for his cousin. Sometimes we put ourselves down for questioning things we think we should not question. We worry that questioning what we read in the Bible, or what we are taught is wrong. In doing so we judge ourselves too harshly - God would much rather have our questions than us being indifferent. He would rather that we are questing, seeking beings rather than acting as robots.

John sent a delegation to inquire of our Lord whether John's work had, indeed, been accomplished - had he identified the right person as the Son of God? Had he truly heralded the Messiah? Suppose a delegation came to us and asked us to justify our title of "Christian". What would our reply be? How would we defend and justify ourselves?

It's a serious point. Are we living out the commission of Christ either in part or in whole? How many of us have cured the blind? Or caused the lame to walk? Or raised the dead? Well, the majority of us leave that to the medical profession. But it is beholden on all of us to preach the Gospel to the poor. Do we do that?

The gospel poses challenging questions, questions far more difficult than those faced on The Chase. To some this seems an inappropriate time of year to be addressing them but that is primarily because we'd rather put them on the back burner. In fact, many of us believe that no time of year is the right time to ask them because we'd rather put them on our spiritual back burner.

Jesus emphasised the preaching of the Gospel to the poor. Why did he do this? Was it because they were less inhibited with the things of the world - the trappings and encumbrances of wealth and possessions? Was it because they would accept his message with a simple faith?

But surely the point is that the poor are always with us and so we are never able to claim that it is a task we have completed. And it is a difficult task for us because we naturally shy away from those who are different to us. The task is there to test us. In proclaiming the message to the poor we are proclaiming salvation to them and, in a sense, proclaiming us worthy of that same salvation.

When Jesus proclaimed the gospel to the poor it was love - God's love - in action. Jesus answered the questions John's disciples posed. Jesus answered the questions that the Gospel poses. Let us pray that we are also up to answering the questions Christ asks of us.