



Isaiah 40.1-8

Mark 1.1-8

6th December 2020 ADVENT 2

Are you up for the journey?

What sort of church member do you think John the Baptist would have been? Answers on a postcard!!

As his father was a priest, today we might call him a *Child of the Manse*, and my guess is he would always have something to say; a frequent contributor to Any Other Business in Church Meetings, and although not a Elder many would think of him as a leader, a sort of *Critical Friend*.

To be honest, I'd probably wish he belonged to someone else's congregation rather than mine!

John the Baptist fills the opening chapter of Mark's gospel and sets the scene for us. We bypass the birth narratives of Jesus and instead plunge straight in to his baptism by cousin John in the Jordan.

John has the air and intensity of a Jewish prophet about him and his message is essentially one of calling the people back to God. It's as if he's identified God is missing, or at least misrepresented, in national life so his task is to remind people of a truth they have forgotten, the centrality of God.

So much of Israel's story, contained in the Jewish Scriptures we still call sacred, rings with relevance for us today. From the ten commandments to the invocation of Amos to trade fairly, the lessons of sibling rivalry in the story of Joseph to the message of faithfulness found in Hosea. In many ways John brings the old into the new, he's so much more than a 'blast from the past, instead he's a bridge that reminds us of the presence and activity of God in the holy ground that belongs to the story of our Jewish cousins.

When people ask the question; *what is the point of interfaith dialogue?* I'm reminded of a spring evening here at AFC when I attended, as their guest, the Passover celebrations of the South Bucks liberal Jewish congregation. It also happened to be, in our tradition, Holy Saturday, and as I left two men shook me by the hand and wished me a 'Happy Easter' for the next day.

I found that a tremendously moving moment, one of the most significant of my life. So, I would say, in relation to the interfaith question, our world is a better, kinder and more hopeful place if there can be that sense of mutuality where, say, Muslims, Jews and Christians can wholeheartedly say to each other: Happy Hanukkah, Happy Eid or Happy Christmas. Each respectful greeting an acknowledgment of our mutual search for God.

John, reminds the people, reminds us, of our need for God.

And, of course, we need a certain humility to receive that message.

The humility that willingly affirms there is something much bigger than us at the centre of the universe. We need help. We need something deeper. We need God.

I'm sure I'm not alone in being confounded by technology. The thought of an 'upgrade' of anything fills me with a nervousness that having only just mastered the controls of the old TV, the new one will probably be beyond me. So, after I've turned it off and on again and that hasn't work, I normally give in, admit my need of help, and call one of our sons!

I think if John were here today he'd probably preach the same message as he did twenty centuries ago. Maybe his society and ours aren't much different. Look out for God, make room for him and have the humility to own that need because that's a good place to be.

So, what was John's world? After all, didn't he come from a priestly family and a religious society. The temple was functioning, and the Torah was being read in local synagogues. Surely God was

present in John's world, so why this intensity on his part, why this dramatic call for national and personal repentance?

Well, we often think of John as the voice calling in the wilderness and that was something of an honourable tradition in those days. Freedom movements often located in these out of the way places with communities like the Essenes living in isolation by the Dead Sea. In the cities and towns people were always busy with life propping up the status quo, but out in the wilderness one found a new perspective of the things that really mattered. Here were voices from the margins who just might be speaking with a fresh and clearer perspective than those shoring up the existing tired and failed system. John became one of those voices.

We are never really told the first part of John's sermons. We know they end with a call to repentance and baptism but we have to fill in the gaps of what led up to that summons.

Did John look at the magnificence of the temple, the fine robes and dwellings of the high priests and question the authenticity of such splendid worship?

Did he wonder why the political class threw their weight behind Herod who was in cahoots with the occupying forces of Rome and question the loyalty of those who ruled in high places?

Did he point to the weekly Sabbath worship of his listeners and ask difficult questions about the connection, or lack of it, they made between synagogue and home?

John seems to point out the gaps and the contradictions and he makes it upfront and personal. This wasn't, he preached, just a problem with their religious leaders and civic rulers, this was everyone's problem, their problem and he seemed to touch a nerve.

Many who listened took personal responsibility for this spiritual lethargy and misguided loyalty. They showed their personal complicity by being baptised by the man who ate locusts and wild honey, the one who wore a garment of camel's hair. They made a

new beginning and a promise to be more sincere, more curious and more open to the calling and ways of God.

We sometimes think of both Advent and Lent as appropriate seasons for a spiritual check-up. Such reflection is as good for us personally as is the MOT for our cars. Because it's easy, even in matters of faith, to drift along and start losing the perspective of what's really important.

Over recent months there's been some discussion among us about hymn singing during these days when our voices have been silent. Some of you have said how, on reflection, it was easy just to sing along every week without thinking of the words, just enjoying the tune. Now, listening but not singing, in reading the words their meaning has struck us in a fresh and challenging way.

It's just a small example of how stopping and thinking about faith differently can bring such positive results.

Maybe John's listeners had become over familiar with religion and rituals and his call was for a fresh evaluation of what really mattered.

We in the Church, as an institution and individuals, need that MOT from time to time. Do we ever use faith and religion, or our position in it, as power over people? Does our practise of prayer veer more towards exclusively asking for things rather than listening out for God's voice? Are we so concerned that we keep the letter of what we think is God's law that we fail to live according to the spirit of God's love.

We wouldn't be the first if we did any of these things. The tragedy would be if we didn't have the humility to go on learning about God and if we didn't have that personal commitment to work afresh and often at that connection between faith and life.

John called his hearers to show their sincerity through baptism. Today we can show ours in the same way, through baptism, church membership, corporate worship and private prayer. It's the call to

discipleship – not to sign up to a fossilized set of rules but to live as a constant seeker after truth.

Now, our bible passage finishes here. John has preached and baptised. He's introduced us to Jesus, so job done?

Well, not exactly. This was simply Act One, and that's why he's best remembered as *The Forerunner*.

I suspect it's probably an unfair question, but I wonder if John the Baptist actually took his own medicine?

He so fervently asked the crowd to welcome this Jesus. Yet was *this* Jesus the one John really expected. He asked the crowds to open their hearts and minds to a new message, yet we know that once Jesus embarked on his ministry John started to get cold feet. In prison he sends his right-hand people to ask Jesus what is, perhaps, one of the most honest yet saddest of all biblical questions: *Are you the one or should we expect another?*

I don't think we can read that with any sense of superiority because it's always a challenge for any of us to re-frame our views on faith, religion or life. Sometimes it feels like a betrayal. What would my Sunday School teacher think of me? The church in which I grew up wouldn't understand me. Or, perhaps worst still, the way I now interpret the bible isn't quite the same as my parents who introduced me to it in the first place.

It took a certain courage for those in previous generations to break with the idea that slavery was God ordained or the place of women in leadership was set in a restrictive cultural norm. And maybe it takes equal courage for us to address the ongoing ethical, social and faith issues of our own life and times.

Greeting this Jesus on the banks of the Jordan was one thing and it was a good start. Following this Jesus all the way to Jerusalem and the cross is another matter and maybe John the Baptist didn't quite make it.

At this time of year, or just after, in more normal times, the holiday brochures arrive in the post or Saturday papers. We are enticed.

It seems to me there are two mindsets we can adopt in our holiday travels. The first is full of pre-conceived expectation that is probably bound for disappointment. We've read about the place, imagined the place and if it doesn't come up to scratch we'll feel short-changed.

The other attitude takes nothing for granted and goes with a more open mind, ready to be shocked or thrilled. This traveller submits willingly to the adventure and probably comes home surprised and thrilled.

Advent is beckoning us to journey with God and to be open to wherever that takes us. The question is always: *Are we up for the journey?*

May it be so, in the name of the God who invites us and travels alongside us.

Amen.

Ian Green, 4th December 2020, Amersham