

ADVENT 2 JOHN THE BAPTIST

05.12.2021 Sermon: John Jackson

OT: Malachi 3:1-4

Psalm: Luke 1:68-79

NT: Philippians 1:3-11

Gospel: Luke 3:1-6

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

In some ways Advent is my favourite season of the Christian year. Yes, there is the merry making and exhilaration of Christmas, but there is something special about the weeks beforehand of quiet reflection and confident waiting – themes which are so beautifully expressed in many of our Advent hymns and carols. And how appropriate that we should focus at this time on Jesus's forerunner, John the Baptist. I am most grateful to the Dean for the opportunity once again to share a few ideas with you.

When I started preparing this address, I had a couple of vivid reminiscences of my father – for reasons that weren't immediately clear, but became so later. This was a man who, like St Luke (the author of today's gospel reading and what we used as the psalm), had a lively imagination and could tell a good story. When I was about 5 years old, there was some rousing music coming from the gramophone – yes, it was that long ago – and I asked my father how these sounds were being made. "Well," he said, "in the box under the black plate that is going round and round, although you can't see them, there are tiny people the height of matchsticks, with tiny little violins, trumpets and drums. For a while I believed him, and even when I became sceptical, I wanted it to be true. I still do.

The second story (from a few years later) was about two law students, friends, who had written an important examination. One failed and the other passed with distinction. The one who had failed, although he was hurting badly, organised a celebratory party for the friend who'd done so well. "That," said my father, "was a brave thing to do. That man was a real gentleman." Later my father would describe Christ as "a total gentleman". That kind of language is not theological, and to some people it now sounds out of date, but I think my father had a point.

Whether that story was true, I do not remember, and (alas) my father is no longer around for me to ask him. Perhaps it was a parable: not a factual account of a specific event, but still true, as it's the kind of thing which has happened and will continue to happen: prodigal sons and good Samaritans are real and timeless. Anyway, ever since then, I've had a special admiration for those who put others before themselves, such as those top class academics who are grateful to the young students from

whom they learn, and piano accompanists who support and blend with the sounds produced by violinists and singers.

John the Baptist comes across as such a person. For a moment I use the present tense, because in a way he still speaks to us. Some people think he is the Messiah. No, he insists that he is not. The real Messiah is greater than he is. John baptises with water; the Messiah baptises with fire and the Holy Spirit. And with perhaps a rhetorical flourish that need not be taken literally, John says he is not worthy even to fasten the thong of the Messiah's sandal.

...Or maybe we can take it literally. Clothing is an important feature of how John is presented in Matthew and Mark. His own clothing is very simple: a garment of camel hair and a belt. And famously, his diet – of wild honey and locusts – is not likely to damage the environment, certainly not the locust population of Judaea is or was as numerous as the locust population of South Africa. So here is one who puts not only another person, but the created world, before himself.

John appears to have been well-liked. Many were attracted to him. This we know, not only from the New Testament, but also from the historian Flavius Josephus. Josephus goes so far as to suggest that the death of Herod Antipas in battle was divine retribution for his execution of a good man – more about the circumstances of John's death in a moment.

In the case of John, are we talking about someone who could be too accommodating of others, perhaps too apologetic? As a younger man, I think I had this tendency. A close friend of mine once accused me (gently) of being too apologetic. I gave the only possible response: "I'm sorry I'm so apologetic." But, jokes aside, this is far from being the case with John. According to Matthew's gospel, when large numbers of Pharisees and Sadducees arrive to be baptised, he does **not** say: "Very good to see you. You are most welcome." Instead he yells (or possibly) spits out the words: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to escape from the wrath to come?" In Luke's version these words (coming just after today's gospel reading) are directed at the crowd in general.

In fact John's fearlessness in criticising others was a direct cause of his execution. He openly criticised King Herod Antipas for marrying his brother's wife Herodias. In response Herod imprisoned him, but for the time being did not want to impose further punishment. At Herod's birthday party the daughter of Herodias (probably his stepdaughter) performed an impressive dance. "I'll reward you," said Herod. "Ask for anything you want." Her mother talked her into asking for the head of John the Baptist. Very unhappily Herod obliged. John was beheaded, and the girl presented the ghastly trophy to her mother. At a superficial level there is

commendable behaviour here: Herod keeps his promise, and the girl puts her mother's interests first. Which makes the story even more awful.

Whenever we meet John the Baptist in the Gospels, we have the impression of one who is sharp-witted and quick to perceive the truth. In Luke's account that trait is evident even before his birth. The mother-to-be, Elizabeth, meets her cousin Mary, the mother-to-be of Jesus. When Elizabeth hears the greeting of Mary, the child in Elizabeth's womb jumps. Was this simply a coincidence, or was the unborn John actually responding? Luke doesn't definitely make that link, but it's hard for us as we read Luke's words, **not** to make it. As with the miniature orchestra in my father's explanation all those years ago, one **wants** it to be true. At work here is a playfully imaginative storyteller. In fact, if one reads the first chapter of Luke's gospel with some care, there is much evidence of a great literary artist, especially in the parallels – not spelt out but clearly present – between the conception and birth of John and of Jesus. For example, I'm sure that the Song of Zechariah (which served as our psalm today) would have reminded you of the Song of Mary, the Magnificat.

Are such parallels and their subtle presentation examples simply of this author's "cleverness"? No, I am sure there is more to them than that. I believe there really are parallels between John and Jesus, some of which may come as a surprise. More or less as Jesus' ministry is beginning, people think that John is the Messiah, i.e. Jesus; after John's execution people think that Jesus is John resurrected. Of course John is right to emphasise how much greater Jesus is than he is, but it turns out that much of Jesus' greatness involves precisely what John does: putting another or others first. Jesus achieves the ultimate here, by dying for the failures of all human beings, past, present and future. That Jesus gets John to baptise him – rather than the other way round – may be the first stage in this unique kind of lordship, of subordinating oneself to others.

If we consider the themes of solitude, silence, and utterance at various levels, we have an intensified sense that John's and Jesus' stories are interwoven. John's father Zechariah is so stunned by Gabriel's announcement that he and Elizabeth are to have a child, that for a while he loses the power of speech. When it comes to the naming of the infant, Zechariah writes on a tablet: "His name is John." He produces what in Greek thinking would be *logos*: clearly formulated utterance that makes sense, but he does it silently. At which point his speech returns. With great eloquence he immediately utters what we now call the Song of Zechariah. Later John himself is identified with the "voice of the one crying in the wilderness" that Isaiah had prophesied. The word translated as "voice" (*phon-e*) is an all-embracing term which (unlike *logos*) often includes **in**articulate sound. At a literal level John's utterances are highly articulate, but perhaps in a deeper sense they are less so than

the *logos* of fully articulated, fully reasoned utterance. What then is this *logos*? The more relevant question is: “**Who** is this *logos*?” And the answer – provided by the Prologue of John’s gospel – is: Jesus. “In the beginning was the *logos* (the Word), and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”

What seems to be happening is this: Out of the wilderness, the place of solitude and silence, comes a semi-articulate sound which offers hope. That sound is (as it were) replaced by fully articulate utterance, the *logos*, the Christ. Does that mean that the wilderness is now a thing of the past? Not really. In Matthew’s and Mark’s accounts, Jesus himself, after being baptised by John, goes into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. And there is a sort of repetition of this motif: when Jesus hears the news of John’s execution, he reacts by withdrawing with his followers to a “deserted place” The word translated as “deserted” (*eremos*) is the same one that is used for “wilderness”. Sometimes this word is translated as “desert”, but that is misleading. The intended picture here is not necessarily of sand, some cactus plants and a bored-looking ostrich, but of a place – or better still a “space”, since we are not limiting ourselves to what is purely physical – where one is alone.

As with both John and Jesus, for us too there are times when we need the experience of a “wilderness”. Perhaps we could regard Advent as a kindly wilderness. Like Lent, but less austere, it’s a time and space of quietness, and ultimately hope, as we listen to increasingly articulate sounds, and await the coming of the Word, who took on human flesh and dwelt among us, and in Spirit continues to dwell among us. To him be the glory. Amen.