

# Good News Proclaimed – John the Baptist

Sermon for Advent 3 2018 at St James and All Saints' by the Rev Derek Lightbourne

Keynote Bible passages: Luke 3.7 – 18, 1.76 – 79, John 1.6 – 8, 19 - 28

The preaching of John the Baptist was as a breath of fresh air from God. At the time, many sincere Jews were conscious that the voice of the prophets spoke no more. They were saying that for 400 years there had been no prophet, and the voice of prophecy had been such a guiding for the Jewish people. Think Isaiah, Ezekiel, Amos and Micah. Prophets had foretold of the coming of a Messiah, and the hope of the people for this Messiah remained. Malachi the last book of the Hebrew Bible looked to a messenger who would prepare the way. One Bible commentator described the contemporary situation thus: 'Scepticism and religious apathy went hand in hand with contempt for moral standards. The priesthood itself had lost any sense of its vocation.' (Bp William Neil)

Such was the social setting in the days of the priest Zechariah a descendant of Aaron, and his wife Elizabeth. Luke describes them: 'as being righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord' (1.6). To their great surprise Zechariah received an angel visitation to tell that God had heard their prayer and they would give birth to a son, and here's the words 'you will name him John. (trans. by the grace of Jehovah (God). You will have joy and gladness and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.' Here then is the beginning of a good news story. Here is the preliminary to God's action in history and the destiny of John and the birth of Jesus.

I share this background as a preliminary to today's gospel focus on John son of Zechariah, and leading into the designated theme 'Good news proclaimed.' Luke records John's birth and father Zechariah's prophecy of his son. May I share this rarely quoted yet significant description: 'You child will be called the prophet of the most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.'

And so, it was, as John grew into adulthood Luke notes he is a figure of history, beginning his ministry in the 15<sup>th</sup> year of the reign of Emperor Tiberias. That would have been about 28 AD (or CE), and it's summarised in verse 18 of the gospel reading: 'With many other exhortations John proclaimed the good news to the people.'

In what ways then is John significant in the purposes of God? How is this relevant in our context?

- 1) We most immediately note his use of symbolic action as one to baptise, as a cleansing action, with people being challenged to change their lifestyle. But may I suggest there was also another role, in the context of Hebrew tradition of the place of prophets, and this was their *social concern* indeed the need for social justice. This for our own day also. There are a number of references of the prophets addressing inequality in society and helping the needy, sharing with those who had not. It may be summarised in Micah's calling: 'What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, to love mercy and walk humbly with your God.' John followed in this line of prophetic message as we heard in today's gospel 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise.'

In our own society we are surely increasingly aware of *social needs*, including child poverty, family violence, and the numbers in prison. And the less obvious ones, including human trafficking (as Chris reminds us) and drug addiction. Hence there's opportunity to give in response to Christmas Appeals and the foodbank. And not only in this season, it's needed all

year. I'm mindful too of the increasingly disparity between those who have and those who don't. Just recently I drove through Gulf Harbour north of Auckland and to be aware of the palatial housing and the numbers of privately-owned yachts and launches moored in extensive marinas was a reminder.

May I suggest we need more modern-day prophets to make us uncomfortable and that we need to be doing more. I'm certainly uncomfortable in how little my help is towards the extent of the need.

2) Second, John son of Zechariah called on people to *repent from ungodly living*. Some were upset by his highlighting this, and they wouldn't have taken too kindly to being addressed as 'a brood of vipers.' If we had read on in the gospel this morning it was to bring to notice that the ruler Herod was mightily displeased about John's criticism of his marriage to Herodias and thus imprisoned. His criticism of those in leadership eventually brought about his arrest and untimely death.

Prior to that, people went out into the wilderness by the river Jordan to hear John's evocative message. In this context John used baptism by immersion in water as the symbol and living out of a change of lifestyle. Thus, he became known as John the baptiser. I prefer this designation to John the Baptist as it more emphasises John's 'up and go' in challenging people in their lifestyle. Interestingly John's legacy was noted by Jewish historian Josephus. He wrote 'John exhorted the Jews to cultivate virtue by righteousness towards one another and piety towards God and come to baptism.'

3) A third aspect of John's preaching of good news was to herald the *coming of the Messiah*. Malachi has spoken of a messenger so when John appeared on the scene there were questions as to whether he was this person. They were asking about his place in the line of the prophets. Some were even suggesting he was the 'new Elijah.' Indeed, John very much fitted the role as he designated himself as 'the voice crying in the wilderness' and by his ascetic living - dining on wild honey and locusts. And as we heard John pointed to the one who would come 'He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.' (v.16) In the Gospel of John this aspect is highlighted and John points to Jesus as Lamb of God. 'I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God. Thus, we anticipate the coming of Jesus as we look forward to celebrating at Christmas.

In summary then the focus on John son of Zechariah includes the themes of two Sundays of Advent, thus recognising the hugely significant role he played in God's purposes for humanity. May I conclude then with a verse from the Letter to the Hebrews giving an overall perspective of this morning's Sermon message: 'Long ago God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.' (Heb 1.1 - 3)