

A message of hope (John the Baptist)

Sermon by the Rev Derek Lightbourne, All Saint's Belmont December 13th, 2020

Keynote Bible Readings: John 1.6 - 8, 19-28, Matthew 3.1 - 12

The preaching of John the Baptist was like a breath of fresh air from God. At the time, many sincere Jews were sadly conscious that the voice of the prophets spoke no more. They said that for four hundred years there had been no prophets. The voice of prophecy had earlier been so much a guiding of the Jewish people as recorded in the Hebrew Bible (our Old Testament), was now silent.

Into this came the remarkable events concerning John. First, of his parents, Zechariah the faithful holy priest who received a visit from an angel, with the message of a son to be born. He had doubted it and was struck dumb until the birth occurred. Elizabeth who with her husband lived good lives in God's sight and had obeyed fully all the Lord's laws and commands. One who had longed all her life for a child and was now past child-bearing age. To them was promised a son, to be called John. The angel's message was this person would be filled with the Holy Spirit, one who would cause many to rejoice, one who would prepare the way for a person even greater, one who would call on the people to repent of their sins, so it wasn't surprising the 'in the 15th year of the rule of Tiberias' (AD 29 - 29) would come the emergence of John, son of Zechariah. John didn't just stay in one place. 'He went throughout the whole territory of the River Jordan preaching....'

All four gospels record his life and ministry - as a preacher with a stirring message, baptising many people, including of Jesus; denouncing Herod's illegal marriage, being imprisoned, having doubts about Jesus, and finally the subject of a drunken promise, beheaded. Not only is John mentioned in the gospels. He is recorded in the writings of Josephus, a Jewish historian of the time: 'John exhorted the Jews to cultivate virtue by righteousness to one another and piety towards God, and to come to baptism.' All that and more, to prepare people for the coming of Jesus, Messiah. Thus, do the gospels give significant recognition of John in God's divine purpose.

What relevance then does his message have for us today? I'd suggest it is a *message of hope*. First it is a looking forward to our celebrating the birth of Jesus, Messiah, born among humankind. 'Advent' gives us the time 'to prepare the way of the Lord.' Early on there were six Sundays preceding so to fit in all the Advent themes, and now four.

Whether or not we like it, the season also is a potential commercial bonanza, given the advertising, the traffic jams round shopping centres, and stressed people. But as well, the need for foodbanks, and child poverty continues. This year of 2020 has been notable for significant events, also remembered at this time. The pandemic continues, and while more overseas, families here are affected by separation from loved ones because of travel restrictions, and we must surely be mindful of the suffering from the pandemic. There's been the recent report on the mosque shooting of earlier in the year, and the anniversary of the Whakaari-White Island eruption with ones killed or severely injured. Locally we have our own traffic congestion in trying to 'get Wellington moving.'

Others especially younger couples and families are affected by the rising costs of housing.

The *sermon theme* is of a *message of hope* for the times. As it was for John's day – 'to guide our feet into the way of peace'. When preparing this sermon, I came across an article in New Scientist which seemed very relevant. It was entitled, '*Reasons to be cheerful*', and suggested 'It is more important than ever to focus on the positives. It's a message that takes us back to the counsel of the pandemic time: 'be kind'. Be positive. An American-UK author, TV personality and mental health is named, including a recent book: 'And now for the good news – to the future with love.'

In her writing, Ruby Wax emphasises three factors towards 'reasons to be cheerful'. First, the *importance of community*, of people being able to meet and mix and communicate with one another. Lockdown reminded us of the experiencing of loneliness and isolation. Quoting: 'There are so many complaints about technology destroying us, but who knew that Zoom would form communities like it has.'

Second, *living, in the environment*. This was a further awareness from lockdown. How important to spend time in the outdoors, to the beaches, and walks in parks and bush, appreciating, and experiencing. Awareness of life all around us.

A 3rd aspect listed by Wax is of *mindfulness*. That is, taking time to 'be' reflecting, meditating, engaging in spiritual practices, and reading. 'We steady each other because we feel empathy, and that's as good as meditation or yoga.' This can be as an individual practice or with ones close to us, as for example 'prayer partners'. The secular world tends to steer clear of 'prayer', and yet mindfulness in its variety of practice has such similar aspects. Prayer extends this in including the relationship with the Divine, an integral dimension for the Christian believer.

In summary the message and life of John the Baptist are of a positive message of hope. Like him we prepare in our hearts for the coming of Jesus, celebrating his birth as Saviour of the world. 2020 has been a year of unsettlement and suffering and our prayer is for 2021 to have more positives in which to celebrate. We continue to care even more in the changing environment, praising the divine Creator for the beauty of the 'Blue Planet'. And our prayer and action are to bring a message of hope for this and future generations.