

## John the Baptist

*A sermon preached on 13 December by Revd Viv Bridges at St Peter's Wolvercote 10.00am service*

Last week we celebrated 'The Prophets', and Rob preached about John the Baptist - the New Testament prophet, but John can teach us so much that I make no apology for preaching about him today, on 'his' Sunday.

Jesus himself said of John, 'A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you." Truly I tell you, among those born of women, no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist'.

John seems to be the link between the Old Testament and the New. He was steeped in the Old Testament Scriptures and whereas many of the OT prophets spoke of someone who was to come and bring salvation, it was John who actually saw this happening. It seems that John recognised something special about Jesus even before either of them were born! When Mary greeted Elizabeth, John, in Elizabeth's womb, 'leapt'. And from the very beginning John recognised his own role - to PREPARE for the CHRIST, the Messiah.

The Gospels tell us that John dressed in clothes made of camel's hair, and ate locusts and wild honey. If we were to see someone who behaved like that today of choice we would call him mad, eccentric! But this was John's way of demonstrating his protest against the self-indulgence that he saw all around him. John, then, challenges us, not to live exactly as he did, but to live as simply as we can, to take to heart, perhaps, Jesus' words about 'not worrying about what we eat and what we wear'.

John understood his vocation in life. He was in no doubt that the Christ, the Messiah was about to appear and he knew that his ministry was to prepare the way for him. In John's day, when someone important was coming, people would literally sweep the roads and today, if someone comes to visit us, we usually clean the house, Hoover and dust the spare room ready for them, ready to welcome them with care and love. John was quite clear that, in order to prepare the way for Christ to come, the people had to 'clean up', 'sweep up', their hearts and minds in order to make them ready for the Christ. So he preached a gospel of repentance.

Repentance means two things - looking backwards, and then forwards: looking back at the things that have been wrong (the things that get in the way of receiving Christ) in order to say sorry, ask God for forgiveness and *accept* his forgiveness, so that hearts and minds are cleared of the dross, truly ready to receive Christ. Then there is looking *forward* - at how lives need to change.

John had no time at all for those people who just *said* they were sorry but didn't mean it in their hearts... 'You brood of vipers!! St Matthew identifies some of those who John challenged as Pharisees and Sadducees. They had heard John's message that the Messiah was 'at hand', and seemed worried about it. They thought they'd rather be safe than sorry, so came to John to be baptised. But John recognised them as hypocrites. They kept to the *letter* of the law, often using it to their own advantage.

They forgot that the Spirit of God's law was a Spirit of Love. John recognised that, in spite of coming for baptism, they didn't really feel they had to change anything in their lives - they were descendants of Abraham and therefore felt assured of salvation whatever they did. But John told them in no uncertain terms that this was not true.

Salvation was to do with mercy and compassion, with what was going on in the heart - not just a question of saying the right things, ticking off a list of rules and regulations. If those Pharisees and Sadducees were truly sorry for the things they had done wrong, it would be shown in the way they lived their lives from then on - they would harvest the fruits of repentance.

John gave some examples of those fruits. People must share the good thing they have - clothes, food. They must be honest in whatever job they have to do - tax-collectors must ask no more than is right and soldiers must not use force or violence to get money - and must be content with their wages!

John teaches us, then, about our need for true repentance - an honest look back at our lives, what we have done wrong, and then a commitment to trying to change our lives. Neither of these things is easy.

Facing up to things we have done wrong can take great courage. I'm sure that most of us will have experienced how difficult our relationships with the people close to us can be if we are feeling guilty or ashamed about something we have done wrong that has affected the other person. It's often very hard to 'say sorry', sometimes because of our own pride (not really wanting to accept that it was, in fact, 'our fault'), sometimes because we are afraid of the other person's reaction - of anger, hurt, or of our apology not being accepted. We prefer not to risk it, so our relationship becomes damaged. But I suspect we've also experienced times when we have had the courage to say sorry, and found a warm response, and a very marked deepening of our relationship. We can be absolutely certain that God always welcome us with joy and delight, however many times we have to say sorry to him, and with this comes a deepening of our relationship with God.

But then there is the looking forward - committing ourselves to trying to become more Christlike: generous, merciful, compassionate, honest, satisfied with the good things we have and ready to challenge injustice. This also takes great courage - but we don't have to do it all on our own. If we truly make room for Christ then he will change us through the power of the Holy Spirit. And we don't have to be afraid of failing (for fail we surely will at times) because we always have that promise of forgiveness, as long as we really are sorry and really are trying to live in Christ's strength.

So - John teaches us about simplicity of life, about true repentance and he also gives us an example of courage, and humility.

John was not afraid to challenge the rulers and those in authority, even Herod himself. There will always be people in authority who use their power to further their own ends. I actually believe we live in an exciting age in many ways - there is an attempt amongst many of those in authority (however inadequate it may seem to us) to help the vulnerable, disadvantaged, to expose abuses of power and a desire to root out real evil - a very different atmosphere from John and Jesus' day. But we still must have the courage to speak out when we see injustice, hypocrisy. This does, indeed, take courage.

And John teaches us about humility. When he recognised Jesus as the Messiah, he recognised that as Jesus' ministry increased, his own would decrease. It wasn't that John was going to go 'into hiding', retire, retreat, give up. John's commitment to God, to the Christ, was total - he continued preaching, warning people about the consequences of a sinful way of life - but he accepted that his ministry had changed, and that it was time to step back. Knowing when to step back, and then doing it, is often not easy. As I prepared this sermon, I couldn't help thinking that I had felt a bit like John during the vacancy, waiting for someone greater than I to come! It's clear that I'm not a bit like John the Baptist, and the Archdeacon warned us not to expect Charles to be Jesus Christ!! but it is time now to step back and allow Charles to fulfil his own ministry here. This is not necessarily as easy as people imagine - any more than retirement is always easy, or growing older. They mean 'decreasing', giving up control!! and whoever takes over may want to **change things!!** But John teaches us that we must recognise when it's right to hand over, and accept it, welcome it. Not that one's commitment to God changes, but that what God is asking us to do is changing.

During Advent we are called to prepare ourselves for Christ to come. I can't think of a better way than to stop and take time to think about the lessons John the Baptist teaches us; about his visible protest against self-indulgence, greed; about his call to true repentance (sorrow for sins, and commitment to new life in

Christ); about his humility in recognising and accepting the need to step back when the time came, but his unchanging commitment to God, and his courage in speaking out against injustice, hypocrisy. These are all tough challenges, but if we allow Christ in to our hearts and minds, HE will give us the strength to do whatever God is calling us to do. In this way Christ becomes real in our lives, and therefore he becomes real, *incarnate*, in the world around us; and through us that Kingdom of God that John proclaimed will indeed have come a little closer, 'at hand' today, here and now.

Amen