

HYMNS	69	“Ye holy angels bright”
	666	“Master, speak! Thy servant heareth”
	189	“Wild and lone the prophet’s voice”
	418	“We have a gospel to proclaim

READINGS: Isaiah 6:1-4, 8-11
John 1: 6-8, 19-28

“WHO WAS THIS JOHN THE BAPTISER?”

“Are you the expected, the Messiah?” the priests and Levites sent from Jerusalem asked John the Baptist. “I am not the Messiah,” he answered. “Who are you, then?” they continued, “Are you Elijah? Are you a prophet? Let us have an answer. We have come a long way, give us an answer.”

“Who do you say you are? What do you say about yourself?”

John the Baptist replied, enigmatically, in the words of Isaiah, “ I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord.”

“Who do you say you are?” is a popular television programme that takes celebrities and investigates their family origins and often comes up with very surprising findings about their background. Well I am going to try to do a similar thing for John the Baptist who is the focus of our liturgy and of our Gospel reading today.

Firstly, I need to say quite clearly that our knowledge of the figure of John the Baptist is very limited. We have the references to him in the New Testament gospels but we need to remember that the Gospels were written at least a generation after John and Jesus lived and died. The Gospels were never intended to be accurate history. Rather they were written by believers, by people who had joined the Jesus movement and they were written to enlighten and encourage other believers. The Gospels were gathered together from fragments of orally transmitted stories circulating among believers.

We also have references to John the Baptist in the works of the Jewish historian, Josephus, who was writing towards the end of the first century. So one thing we can say with some confidence is that John the Baptist was an important figure in his time. He was well enough known that people outside his immediate circle came to know of him.

So what then do we know with a reasonable degree of certainty about John the Baptist?

- We are pretty sure who his parents were, as we said in our opening liturgy “God, our Father, you gave Zechariah and Elizabeth, in their old age, a son called John.”

The experience of Zechariah when he received the message from God about becoming a parent is recorded in the Gospels. Both from Josephus and from the Gospels we know that John the Baptist was a renowned eccentric. There were plenty of people who wandered around Palestine teaching and preaching but John had some particularly unusual attributes. He defied the conventions of his time. He wore a rough coat of camels’ hair, pulled around his waist with a leather belt.

John’s diet was unusual, too – locusts and wild honey, whatever could be gathered from the countryside where he preached. It seems that John spent most of his time away from towns in the dry, wilderness places of Palestine. It is a mark of John’s importance that priests and other religious leaders, as well as ordinary people, travelled to come to him.

John had a pretty uncompromising message for his fellow Jews – it was a message that urged them to repent of their godless ways and immoral lives, repent and be baptised to cleanse themselves of their sins.

It is a measure of John’s charismatic personality that people flocked to him, travelled long distances and stood on windy, dusty hillsides to hear a message that was challenging and difficult. Clearly John was a cult figure and people felt that he had a message for that time – a time of suffering and uncertainty for Jews living under Roma rule.

John called people to a baptism of repentance. Baptism was not a usual ritual for the Jews – it was used as a means of initiation when non-Jews wished to convert and follow the God of the Jews. John was calling people to take stock of their lives, change direction and seal this commitment through the act of purification – baptism.

What on earth would John have to say if he came back to this world today?

So, we know that John preached a baptism of repentance but the second part of his message was equally challenging and counter-cultural. He was saying, ‘don’t look at me, who I am is not important, my role is to announce the one who is coming after me.’ John was clear, his role was to point beyond himself, to be a signpost for the one who was to come. John was certainly a prophet, many thought he was Elijah come back to earth but John was a very self-effacing, self-obliterating prophet.

Now John was, of course, pointing people to his cousin, Jesus from Nazareth, who he would baptise. Many people, not least John himself, found it difficult to know why Jesus, the coming one about whom John had spoken, should come to him for baptism. Jesus was not an evil-doer, Jesus had no need of purification, Jesus had nothing of which to repent and yet, in identification with his people, Jesus was baptised by John and in doing so received the confirmation, ‘You are my son, the beloved of God.’

The other thing we know was that John was killed by Herod for denouncing his unlawful marriage but probably also for criticising Herod's collusion with the Roman overlords.

All these thousands of years down the line John the Baptist remains for us an enigmatic figure. In 1946 some manuscripts from the 1st century were found at Qumran – they are usually referred to as the Dead Sea Scrolls. Many scholars think these scrolls were the Library of an ascetic group of Jews called Essenes. There were some similarities between John the Baptist and the Essenes but there were differences also. Perhaps there was an influence from the Essenes on John yet that remains an open question.

John baptised Jesus in the river Jordan – an event that marked the beginning of Jesus' own ministry. As the Gospel writers tell us one of Jesus' first addresses after that was in the synagogue in his home village of Nazareth. There he took as his text some verses from the prophet, Isaiah, Chapter 61.

“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me,
he has sent me to bring good news to the poor
and to bind up the broken-hearted.”

In John's baptism God had announced his anointing of his own son and now that son, Jesus, was announcing his manifesto for bringing in God's values and the kingdom of on earth.

God's values, John's values, Jesus' values are impressive and they amount to 'good news' for the poor, the broken-hearted and for the captives, for all those whose hearts are heavy. Jesus was saying that all such people will be given cause to rejoice in the new order that his coming will inaugurate.

I don't know if you saw the service for the Grenfell Tower victims and survivors which was held in St. Paul's Cathedral recently. There we did see the broken-hearted, those who felt neglected and marginalised. Those people epitomised for me the sort of people for whom Jesus came. Yes, he came for all God's people but for all of God's people especially at their time of greatest need.

I began this sermon by asking, 'who did John the Baptist think he was and who did others think he was?'

John was clear – he was a signpost, a voice preparing the way for Jesus, God's son. In the light of all that we have heard, 'who do we think we are?'

Are we not called to be signposts and voices for justice and mercy, too? Earlier in the service we heard these words,

“People of God: Return!
You are called to be God's own.

From the mountain tops announce the good news.
God comes in justice and peace
To all who follow his ways.
You are God's children."

Who do we think we are? God's children, called to announce the good news in words and deeds, called to act for justice and live out mercy, called to be signposts to Jesus, just as John the Baptist was. Amen.