

11th December 2016

**Third Sunday in Advent: John the Baptist: waiting
Between the Times**

Luke 1. 13-17; 7.18-28

There are two births described in the Luke's Christmas story. One of course is baby Jesus. The other is his cousin, John. John would become John the Baptist, a fiery no non-sense preacher who would prepare the people for the coming Saviour. He would point to Jesus, wait eagerly for him and yet stands permanently on the outside. His role is simply one of a herald, announcing the arrival of Jesus, pointing beyond himself, looking forwards but never arriving. .

In many ways he represents waiting, the theme of our advent sermons. The haunting question as we will explore in a moment, is does he ever arrive? Does he understand what he has proclaimed? Does he comprehend who Jesus is and what he has come to do? He stood waiting between the old and the new, because that was what he was called to do and perhaps, in that waiting found meaning.

I will structure this sermon around five P's: Purpose, Preparation, Proclamation; Protest

Purpose

The very first scene in Luke's gospel, sounds very familiar. A story about an old man with a barren and equally old wife who have yearned for a child but not been given one. The way Luke tells the story reminds us of other biblical stories such as the birth of Isaac, Samson and Samuel. All these births were to women desperate to have a child and who were open to negotiation with God about should they have a child, giving it back to God for his purposes. Isaac's birth brought about the partial fulfilment that Abraham would be the father of a great nation. The purpose of Samson's birth was to deliver the Israelites out of the hands of the Philistines. The purpose of Samuel's birth becomes clear when he is called by God into the temple to be the priest of God to sweep away a corrupt system and set up something more faithful to God. Luke has his purpose in describing the birth of John, because this child will be born with a purpose.

It is amusing how people manage to read into a baby's personality about what they are going to be when they grow up. A baby who kicks hard in the womb will be a footballer. A baby who is born early will always be in a

hurry, and conversely, one born late will be late for ever. Baby who sleeps a lot will be laid back as an adult, one who cries a lot will be a handful.

John has an unusual conception with an angel appearing to his Father Zechariah in the temple, to tell him the news that his wife Elizabeth will have a child. He doubts this is possible and is struck dumb. The baby is going to be named after his father but his mother unconventionally steps in and says no his name must be John. Only when John is born is Zechariah then able to speak in words of praise to God.

Could you have guessed from John's unorthodox birth that he would become an unpredictable wild prophetic character, living in the desert, eating locusts and wild honey and upsetting the rulers of the land? It is highly unlikely they could have guessed even a fraction of this because the events of John's birth simply indicate that John was chosen by God.

Part of the adventure of following God is discovering where God will lead us next. Knowing that God has called us tells us nothing about what God has called us to. Even those who are more or less comfortably established in doing something to which they have been called by God

cannot be certain that tomorrow, next month or next year this calling will remain the same.

The birth of a child is always a time of hope and expectancy. What will they do with their lives? What does the future hold? I think you are letting yourself in for a hiding for nothing if all you hope for them is that they are happy. If happiness is the only goal of life you run the risk of raising self-indulgent, narcissistic brats who are only concerned about their own happiness.

The bible seems to describe happiness as the by-product of us living with purpose in the ways of God: loving God and finding our identity in him, loving our neighbour as we love ourselves. Happiness is found not in how many people serve you but in how many people you serve.

It is a reminder to us to bring up our children with intention and purpose. Coming to church with them hopefully supplies that focus and direction for life.

Bluntly speaking, from the moment we are born we are all waiting for death. The gospel good news is that death is not the end, we have future glory waiting for us, provided that we use this time of waiting with meaning and intention, discovering life's purpose and relating to the Creator of life who holds the keys to eternal life. John the

Baptist's task was to call people to be prepared to recognise the coming of Christ- to get ready and wake up.

Preparation

John of course goes off into the wilderness calling people to repentance and baptism. While baptism was not new to the Jews, John's particular version of it was. Ritual washing was common in first century Judaism. Numerous baths for ritual immersion have been found in Jerusalem and in Qumran. Ritual washing was what one did, regularly, in preparation for worship.

In contrast John's baptism was a single unrepeatable action. Some people have suggested that baptism is closer to one of the immersions required of Gentiles when they became converts to Judaism or initiates in the Qumran community, this kind of washing symbolized a movement from one state into another and in particular was the means of an outsider moving to the status of insider.

Even if it is likened to this kind of initiates baptism, John's baptism is different in that it is done by one person to another. All the familiar ritual washings and cleansing in Judaism were self-administered. John's baptism was done by him to someone else. This makes John's baptism a community event, carries with it a corporate community significance.

Being a Christian has always been corporate. You cannot be a Christian on your own. God calls us into a Body, a community, to care and serve each other and those in the world. We are stronger together and we grow together. Yes, people are going to irritate you. There will be clashes of personalities and interests. In the working through of all those issues is where maturity, wisdom and spiritual growth happens. Faith is both private and public.

A second major difference is that John's baptism took place not in the specially built and ritually clean and sanctified buildings such as the temple but in the grubby and unappetizing river Jordan. On our recent Holy Land Pilgrimage we saw a special made baptismal site by the Jordan which had nice promenades and viewing galleries and changing rooms and souvenir shops. All very sanitized. None of that when John was at work. Christianity is about getting your hands dirty and not worrying so much about whether things look nice or are nice.

Most unusually of all, the baptism of John was not a means of allowing outsiders to become insiders but for insiders (the people of Israel) to repent. The Greek word *metanoia* means literally a change of mind or heart. Turn

and face in another direction. The only way that people could prepare for the one who is to come was through an entire reorientation of everything they knew and believed.

One of the first elements of the reorientation required of them was an acceptance that forgiveness of sins could take place outside of the temple and institutional formal religion. A concept that would have been surprising and shocking to them. John's message of being prepared to change how you think and believe was a vital preparation for the coming of Jesus.

While many people accepted his baptism it became quickly clear in Jesus' ministry that they had not understood the radical implications of John's message. We may not comprehend it any better today. It is easy to assume that because baptism is an unrepeatable event so repentance and reorientation is too. Once we have undergone baptism, we can breathe a sigh of relief, we are in the club, and we are saved. We can get on with our comfortable, insider lives once more. Jesus' teaching suggests otherwise: baptism initiates us into a lifelong reorientation into the things of God and the life of the kingdom of God. This is lifelong disruption and challenge. Advent is a time to grasp again John's disruptive spirit of reorientation, since it is this spirit that prepares us to fully greet Jesus, the one for whom we wait.

Proclamation

There is an old superstition that goes 'three times a bridesmaid, never a bride'. There can be a deep down fear in some people that when one is too often in the supporting role you will never get the central role. We become typecast – set in a certain way of being that will shape us for the rest of our lives. John's sole purpose was to point to someone else – to proclaim someone else.

Some followers of John found him such a powerful prophet that they were unwilling to follow anyone else. The gospels make it clear that John was only the witness or the herald – the person who pointed to the light but not the light itself. He holds the advertising hoarding pointing to the attraction, but never the attraction. Always the bridesmaid but never the bride.

In our world in which personal status and success is so important and prized it is hard to get our heads around the concept of someone whose whole *raison d'être* is to point beyond themselves to someone else. John the Baptist stands as an example to us of one who is prepared, in all humility, to recognize that he is not the centre but the periphery; not the attraction but the signpost to the attraction, not the light but the one who helps others to see the light.

The waiting we do at Advent reminds us of the importance of taking up John's baton of witness and passing it on and of the humility needed in Christian life and ministry that's it's not about us but the one we serve.

But even John may not have been sure about who he was pointing to?. Was Jesus the one who was to come and who he was preparing the way for?

In the media people say that effective communication is about 93 per cent dependent upon the presentation and only 7 per cent dependent on the content, which is, when you think about it, a depressing thought. If we look at the recent political campaigns for Brexit and Trump they have been light on content, full of what has been termed 'post truth' – in other words it doesn't matter what you say and whether you can back it up or how factual it is – it is all about the presentation.

One of the challenges for the church and the Christian faith in this country is that our public presentation is on the whole dreadful. Church has never been cool let's not kid ourselves. But our public image is negative today in popular imagination. Church is boring, irrelevant, just for old people, we believe in things that are untrue, we are bigoted and judgemental – all popular opinions about us.

My daughter was having an interview for university last week and whilst waiting with fellow students one of them sounded off about Christmas. Why are we making all this fuss over Christmas? Who cares? Libby said 'well maybe Christians care?' To which the student said – 'who's a Christian today?'

That's why we are encouraging you to become more public about your affiliation to a church. 'Like' our Facebook page; give out invites to our Christmas services; don't be ashamed to belong to church because otherwise you collude with popular sentiments. In January I'm going to give a talk based on Tim Keller's book 'Making Sense of God with addresses the questions of sceptical world. The talk is designed to strengthen you in your witness and defence of the Christian faith. May the Spirit empower you to be witnesses for Christ?

One of the challenges of biblical interpretation is that we only have 7% and none of the 93% of communication. This causes all sorts of problems, one of which we encounter in the story of John. John asks his followers to go and find Jesus and ask 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?' The problem is not knowing the tone of voice John asked his question. Did his voice go up or down at the end of the question? Is he wondering 'are you the one? The one I've been

prophesying about?’ Or is he doubting: ‘was I wrong? I thought you were the one who is to come but now I’m not so sure?’

The gospels are ambiguous whether John recognised Jesus when he came to be baptised by him. John’s and Matthew’s gospel do Mark and Luke don’t. Given that it is interesting that Luke has a passage where John the Baptist wonders whether Jesus is the one.

Both the tone of voice and the knowledge of whether Luke thought John knew who Jesus was are lost in the mists of time but this question remains hanging in the air. Jesus gives the answer: report what you see: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the lepers cleansed, the dead are raised, good news proclaimed to the poor. But we are not told John’s reply. Did he accept this or not?

Of course Luke is more interested in a different person’s response. Ours! Our challenge is to recognise Christ today. Is he the one? Is he the Saviour? Advent is a time of waiting to clear our vision, sharpen our insight and enable us to see Jesus. Next year we will have another one of our popular Christianity Explored Courses which allows people to ask question and search for themselves as to what they make of Jesus and the invitation to have faith in him.

Protest

Poor John he sacrificed everything for the prophetic message that he was to bring. He proclaimed his message with clarity and fearlessness. He upset the leaders of his day, was arrested and killed for his message. Herod Antipas had already been married but had put away his first wife in order to marry the daughter of his half-brother who herself was already married to another of his relatives. This marriage contravened a handful of Levitical rules and must have caused general upset but John is the only one we know who was arrested for his criticism.

He spoke truth to power. He paid for it with his life.

There comes a time to speak out.

I was happy to be part of the Christian Aid Campaign Light the Way in trying to change the way that we see refugees. This year has seen public discourse harden against immigrants and refugees have been seen in the same category. Yet these are desperate people fleeing violence and war. Those who were evacuees during the War know all about leaving their homes in fear and needing to find a place of refuge and welcome. How can we vilify them and treat them as sub human? It is a slippery slope to scapegoating sections of society – those sort of attitudes lead to great evil and injustice and a loss

of our humanity and disrespects the image of God in humanity. Edmund Burke the Philosopher famously said: ***The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing. All tyranny needs to gain a foothold is for people of good conscience to remain silent.*** I was ready to speak out and add my voice to try and change the negative way in which refugees are regarded at the moment in this country.

John the Baptist was fearless in calling people to change their ways and their attitudes. Jesus acknowledged his greatness. 'I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; But then Jesus added: 'yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.'

Why did he add this second part? It seems a little bit of a slight on first reading. But remember the ethic of the Kingdom that Jesus always advocated: namely that the kingdom of God works on a paradoxical topsy turvy ethic in which the greatest is least and the least greatest, the first is last and the last first.

John is indeed the greatest human being because he lived out his calling to the full, but there is no reason to venerate him because the kingdom of God doesn't do veneration: he is simply taking his proper place within it.

Jesus upside down kingdom ethic is one to which Christians have never quite reconciled themselves. It runs so much against the grain of human nature that we struggle to comprehend it. Like grace: we cannot believe that someone would get a gift that they don't deserve. It is a challenge that we must never cease from wrestling with and perhaps the greatest challenge is not to accept it emotionally but practically and to organize our lives and Christian communities around it: honouring the least and sacrificing for the good of all rather than supporting a system that favours the few and privileged.

John the Baptist is a strange character. We would regard him as a religious weirdo. Yet we need, in his words, to repent: to open our minds and hearts and look again. He speaks to us in the Advent season of waiting about the need to wait for our purpose in life to become clear. About preparation to see how God is at work. To proclaim the way of the Lord. To protest when the ways of God are being violated. Purpose, Preparation, Proclamation and Protest: Prepare ye the way of the Lord.

Bibliography: Paula Gooder; *The Meaning is in the Waiting*, Canterbury Press 2008