

Third Sunday in Advent

Isaiah 35:1-10

Matthew 11: 2-11

St. German's Cathedral 11th Dec 2022

John asks the question indirectly via his disciples "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?."

Matthew 11: 3



Last week Rosemary began exploring something of the life of John the Baptist and today we've got him once again. So today I want to look at his vocation centring around three areas:

- his calling
- his imprisonment
- his death

Some might regard it is not a very appropriate thing to do to range across the Gospels to get a picture of John, because many would argue, correctly I might add, that each gospel tells its own story from its unique perspective and to pick and mix from one gospel and another doesn't do justice to what each Gospel writer is trying to say.

[Just to make the point here, you are all familiar with the Christmas story, but we do plunder Matthew, Luke and John, but what would it look like if we relied on Mark, which begins with the baptism of Jesus at about 33 years of age. There is simply no birth narrative.]

So with this caution in mind let's look at different Gospel accounts understanding of John.

First John's call

We learn about John's call towards the beginning of each of the Gospel's, for example in John's Gospel (1: 6) he is the first human being mentioned after the passage about the Logos (the Word of God). You know that passage that is read at Christmas, which introduces Jesus as the 'Word' made flesh or the 'Logos' coming to live amongst us.

Luke's Gospel, tells us about John's pre-birth, where Gabriel announces to his father, Zechariah, that the promised child will:

'... make ready a people prepared for the Lord.'
(Luke 1: 16-18)

John's unique call comes at a price – living in the wilderness of the Jordan valley and wearing strange and perhaps symbolic dress and living on a strange diet which Mark tells us about with his :

' camel's hair (garment) ... a leather belt ... and (eating) locusts and wild honey.' (Mark 1: 6)

John the Baptist, we know, fearlessly proclaimed the imminent coming of the Messiah with his message being pretty blunt, for example, as we discovered last week, in Matthew's gospel he refers to the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism as a *'brood of vipers!'* fleeing from the wrath to come (Matthew 3: 7). John warns that if they are to escape punishment then they would have to *'Bear fruit worthy of repentance'* (Matthew 3: 8).

John challenges people to change their lives, rather than relying on their pedigree associated with being connected to Abraham (Matthew 3: 9).

The climax of John's call and ministry was the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan. Matthew portrays John as being cautious about undertaking this (Matt 3: 13ff). John's ministry is thus complete as he points out the *Son of God* (John 1: 34) or *Lamb of God* (John 1: 35).

Even at the climax of his ministry John loses two of his own disciples who desert him to follow Jesus – one of them being the Apostle Andrew (John 1: 40), who then brings Simon Peter to Jesus.

So what can we learn from John's calling?

If we are to prepare a way for the Lord like John, we must be willing to initiate things, without being possessive about them and be prepared to hand over to others to continue. Too many of us in our Christian ministry can be very possessive of our little area.

We have to recognise that ultimately it is God's mission and not ours. It is really important in church life that we are both prepared to shoulder responsibilities, but also to let go and to discern when to do it. That is of course true of any environment we find ourselves in.

Every baptised Christian has the privilege of sharing in God's ministry and we are all invited to play a part. So as we begin a new Church year we might re-assess before God our own part?

John's imprisonment

The second exploration I want to make is around John's imprisonment. John's blunt proclamation of the Good News brought him inevitably to a clash with those in authority (just as it would do for Jesus). The arrest eventually came, because he dared to criticize Herod the tetrarch's relationship with his brother's wife – Herodias (Luke 3:19). For his pains he was thrown into prison.

We can only begin to imagine what John must have felt like festering in a dark prison – perhaps he felt abandoned by God – in many ways this must have been John's Gethsemane. (Incidentally next Wednesday we observe the Feast Day of St. John of The Cross a Spanish Carmelite friar (1542-1591) perhaps best known through his poetry who lived in the 16th century and coined the phrase '*The dark night of the soul*'. The image is a metaphor to describe the experience of loneliness and desolation in one's life and typically associated with a crisis of faith.

John must have had something of a '*dark night of the soul*' associated with severe doubts in prison about his vocation coming to such a dead end, but he might be aware too, that this was nothing new - other prophets had been imprisoned before him. But perhaps Jesus

himself was a big question for him too – the company he kept, and little things which may have irritated him about fasting, for example, it is recorded that John's disciples fasted, but the disciples of Jesus' didn't. Likewise there were different attitudes to drink!

Then in his doubt about his own ministry John sends disciples to Jesus (Matthew. 11: 3) asking him:

'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?'

The answer Jesus gives to the messenger at first sight seems rather odd, instead of giving a straight yes or no he gives a string of quotations from Isaiah:

'Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. ⁶And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.' (Matt 11:4-6)

Jesus, it seems to me, says more than a simple yes to John's ministry. As well as endorsing him as the herald of the Messiah through his reference to Isaiah he also says:

*¹¹Truly I tell you, among those born of women
no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist.
(Matt. 11: 11)*

So John's night of doubt, perhaps becomes the dawn of a new faith in God.

All of us go through periods of doubting about what we are doing – all of us have Gethsemane's of one kind or another – coming through them makes us that much stronger. I wonder if that is your experience?

It might only be so with hindsight coming through such situations, but of course we have to recognise that for others such experiences are so crushing that they cannot lift their heads above the parapet.

Perhaps from time to time we need to be as Jesus was for John – helping our brothers and sisters to see light at the end of the tunnel, for this is surely what Jesus did for John here in today's gospel.

John's death

Finally John's death - John had a pretty sordid end, losing his head because of a foolish petty-king at a party rashly promising anything up to half his kingdom (Mark 6: 23) to the girl Salome who pleased him by her dancing. What a terrible way to go – at the whim of a despot, who didn't want to lose face in front of his guests and look even more ridiculous (Mark 6: 27) – even if it grieved him to do so (Mark 6:26)! So ends the earthly life of this faithful servant of God whose vocation as the herald of the Messiah was the link between the old dispensation and the new.

What we can take away from John the Baptist's life, however, is that all of us are asked to be faithful - not successful. For it is in being faithful that as co-workers for the kingdom, that we play our part in the mission of God. Of course the most important co-worker is someone who becomes the focus at Christmas – Mary, without whose 'yes' there could have been no incarnation of the second person of the Trinity, but we too are invited to discover for ourselves what a yes to God means.

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