

TFTD Advent 6: John the Baptist

Spoiler alert!! - This is the sermon for this evening service on zoom. If you are planning on coming to the service and want to be surprised then do not read.

(If you would like the link for the evening service at 6:30 on Zoom- please email Loveday: loveday.alexander@btinternet.com)



The picture of John in our calendar is when he was an adult baptising Jesus, He has a big beard, and I think he is dressed in his trademark camel hair. We are told he lived in the desert and ate wild honey and locusts (the craft today is one of mine - i thought i would make honeycomb because i didn't think anyone would appreciate a craft with locusts in).

We have a picture of John as an adult because he is representing the prophets, the guys who spoke about Jesus, predicted that God would do something amazing, to bring people back into relationship with him. Though they weren't exactly sure what he was going to do. John's message was 'prepare the way by repenting and receive forgiveness for your sins'.

But John first appears in this story much earlier- before he was even born. He has his own angel foretelling his birth, appearing to Zacariah, his dad, a priest - sadly, for Zacariah, he didn't believe the angel straight away, like Mary did, and he got struck dumb for the whole of Elizabeth's pregnancy with John. But he got with the programme, in time to make his own prophecy- we will read it later in the service- in it he said of his son:

*And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the most high,
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him*

To give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins.

That is a big job John had to live up to! And he started early - John was one of the first to celebrate Jesus- (apart from Mary and probably Joseph) as he leapt for joy in his mother's womb.

John had a plan from God from birth, he was to prepare people's hearts for Jesus.

And he did! He was popular with his message- which is a little odd because his message was calling people names, he called them a brood of vipers and told them to turn their backs on their previous lives and turn to God.

He was a guy you either loved or hated. some people came to be baptised by him. But others thought he was possessed by a demon. Jesus says John was like Elijah- Elijah was single-minded in his message that was to confront people of their sin, his message was often rejected by people too.

But unlike Elijah and the other OT prophets, John had the unique position of baptising Jesus himself, the one he was preparing people for. The other prophets talked of the coming messiah in the future- John got to meet him, baptise him and hear God's voice confirming Jesus as his son.

I think some of John's appeals might have been because he was a weird guy for God. He was memorable, he was uncompromising. He even told king Herod, he was a sinner that his marriage was unlawful- that message was rejected too. This uncompromising position got him arrested and put in prison. Herod had had enough and stopped John's teaching and baptising. So John ended up alone, away from the crowds, with nothing to do, no mission to fulfil. And what happened? He began to have doubts,

In prison, on his own he had time to reflect, things were not going as he thought they would.

He began to look at what Jesus was doing and wasn't as sure anymore, so he sent some of his followers to Jesus to ask him if he actually was the messiah or should we be expecting someone else?

This is where I start to become interested in John the baptist. The guy at the beginning of the story, he is great but I can't really relate to him. I didn't have angels predicting my birth or a plan from God for my life- well not one i know about. I am also not as uncompromising or certain to call people names or go and live in a desert and eat weird food.

That John the baptist is great for Sunday schools - he has one point, one job, and he did it with flair! But the John written about in prison, he feels a bit more real, a bit more human.

When we are all alone, when things don't measure up to what we expect, and when God might seem very silent- that is when we all have doubts.

Doubts are normal, doubts are part of faith. Someone once said, "*the opposite of faith is not doubt: it is certainty*". When you are certain of something you don't need to have faith in it. I am certain this house is here, I don't have to have faith in it. But to have faith, involves there being a bit of doubt, a bit of uncertainty.

The act of trusting, of having faith is part of the relationship we have with Jesus. We, like John, can take our doubts, our questions to Jesus.

And what did Jesus do when John had doubts? Jesus didn't condemn him for them but answered them. - He told his followers to go back and report what they saw and heard

- Blind receive sight
- Lame walk
- Lepers cured
- Deaf hear
- Dead are raised
- Good news is preached to the poor

The kicker is Jesus didn't actually answer John's question. He just said look at what I am doing and judge for yourself. Jesus hardly ever answered peoples questions with a straight answer, I bet that was frustrating!- it can be frustrating reading it. What he did was tell stories, ask questions back or give clues; He made people think for themselves.

John would have had ideas about what the Messiah was, (probably, like others that he would be a military leader and would defeat the Roman occupation) what he was expecting and Jesus didn't match up. Jesus' answer was to say look at what I am doing and rethink what you expected.

That can be hard, especially if we are like John, and have spent a long time building up a picture of what we think Jesus should be like and he isn't like that.

John's doubts led him back to the real Jesus, maybe looking at him, as he actually was for the first time. Looking at this kingdom of God, that is upside down and built on service and not on military might or political power.

And that might be another way that John helps prepare the way for Jesus. He shows us what to do with our human faith filled doubts. He shows us how to look again at Jesus when things aren't as we expect. We all need to keep going back to Jesus and re-thinking- repenting and staying in a relationship with him with our doubts and our faith.

So this advent, this time of hope filled waiting -where like John things are not going to be as we expected. Maybe we should take this time to relook at the stories of Jesus and what he is doing in the world now, and rethink our expectations in the knowledge that whatever Jesus is doing will be better than we hope for.

© Anna Cerval-Peña 2020