



## Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Third Sunday of Advent

readings: [Zephaniah 3 14-20](#), [Philippians 4 4-7](#), [Luke 3 7-18](#)

12<sup>th</sup> December 2021

As a preacher of some years' experience, I was amused by the apocryphal story I heard about feedback given to a preacher at the church door, following what had been an exceptionally long and somewhat boring sermon. The congregation filed out past him at the end of the service without a word...save for one man who shook his hand and said: "Your sermon reminded me of the peace and love of God". The preacher was ecstatic: "no-one has ever said that about one of my sermons before! Tell me how did it remind you of the peace and love of God?" Well said the man, "it reminded me of the peace of God, because *it passes all understanding*.....and it reminded me of the love of God because *it endured forever!*"

So mindful of this cautionary tale, and directed by the lectionary to preach on John the Baptist, I offer what I hope will be a "*brief and understandable*" sermon:

A sermon on John the Baptist could actually be delivered in just 3 words: Prophet, Proclaimer, Predictor, but I suspect you may want a little more than that?

John the Baptist: **The prophet** who predicts the coming of Jesus, and himself also fulfils the ancient prophecies of the Old Testament, particularly of Isaiah, as being "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight... so all flesh shall see the salvation of God"

John the Baptist: **The proclaimer** who announces the coming of Jesus as Messiah, who recognises that Jesus is more powerful than he is, as one who will baptise not with water but with the Holy Spirit.

John the Baptist: **The predictor** who by his own arrest and death for daring to challenge the religious and secular status quo, foreshadows the death of Jesus himself.

John the Baptist: *a man with a mission*, called by God to jolt the conscience of a sleeping nation, called by God to "prepare the way of the Lord".

John came from the wilderness: a theological as well as geographical wilderness. "Theological" as it was remote from prevailing religious conventions and secular authority structures; "Geographical" in that it provided a physical and spiritual place to retreat, regroup, renew...a wilderness space that Jesus himself was to use for 40 days and 40 nights at the start of his own ministry.

John came from the wilderness dressed in camel hair clothes, long hair flowing. He caused quite a stir. To a people physically oppressed by the Romans and spiritually oppressed by their own religious leaders, what he offered: a call to a new and better life, must have sounded wonderful. So they came in their droves to be baptised.

The common people came, but also the religious people. Approaching the now famous locust-eating prophet, the religious folk, the Pharisees, must have expected a warm welcome: "Come to the front of the baptismal queue". Well they got a rather different warm welcome.

"You brood of vipers" he called them. You are obsessed with liturgical detail, obsessed with getting it right, rather than doing the right thing You are full of pride "we have Abraham as our ancestor, so we know how to do it right". John challenges their comfortable status quo, telling them God can raise up children of Abraham from these very stones, so don't get cocky about your "special" status, stop displaying the self-aggrandisement and one-upmanship that is a perpetual fault line in the human condition. Worry instead

about your upcoming judgement, for “Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire”. A warm welcome indeed awaits.

He was also preparing the common folk for the coming Kingdom. So he had to speak out. There was no time left for complacency, no time for banking on past religious heritage, no time for failing to practice what had been preached. Repentance was your only hope. And the coming kingdom was for *all*: including the outcasts of polite society: Romans or Jews who collaborated with them; soldiers and tax collectors, those who’ve got by in life with a philosophy of wheeling and dealing, not rocking rock the boat, live and let live, and don’t worry too much about the consequences. To these, John asserts that consequences do matter, so they too are called to repent.

Repentance doesn’t just look backwards to seek forgiveness for the past; it calls for a change of direction going forward, a change into a new way of living, a life where our words of love and justice are translated into actions, where those with 2 coats share with those who have none, those with food to spare, share with those who go hungry.

John’s message boils down into a simple slogan: “Repent and believe. Believe in the Good News that is coming. Believe in the Messiah who will set God’s people free”. This was John’s challenge. And like all challenges to the existing status quo, it got him into trouble, serious trouble. Challenging the religious order, challenging the Roman state, challenging King Herod himself, gets you betrayed, arrested, imprisoned and martyred.... just like his Lord who comes to baptise not with water but with the Holy Spirit.

The message of John’s story for us today is that telling the gospel and living the gospel is not going to be all sweetness and light. It will be seen as a threat to all that the world holds dear, a revolutionary challenge to the existing social order. It can evoke violent resistance, or silent contempt. It can lead to suffering and social loss, to personal opprobrium and ostracism...and even in some parts of the world today, to imprisonment and death.

For the world doesn’t take kindly to threats to its comfort. It doesn’t care for the active affirmation of God’s commandments. People can lose their heads metaphorically if not literally if they stand up for the claims of the gospel against the values of the world.

It happened to John, it happened to Jesus, it can happen to us.

But as our Lord himself has promised (John 16.33) “In the world you may have tribulation. But be of good cheer, I have overcome the world”.

Thanks be to God.

**The Revd Dr Alan Flintham  
Cathedral Chaplain**