

## **John the Baptist (Luke 3.7-18)**

John the Baptist comes across as a tough man. An extreme character. When we first meet him properly, he's living in the desert. Mark and Matthew tell us that he wore camel skins and a leather girdle, and lived on locusts and wild honey. And all the gospels agree that his message was to demand repentance, from everyone in Israel from King Herod downwards.

And he didn't pull any punches. He annoyed Herod so much, attacking Herod's immoral relationship with his sister-in-law, that Herod had him thrown into prison and eventually killed. In today's gospel from Luke, crowds of ordinary people come to the river Jordan to repent and be baptized, and instead of being pleased to see them, John calls them a brood of vipers and accuses them of not being really sorry. Then he threatens them, saying they'll be cut down by God's axe and thrown into the fire, like a rotten fruit tree.

But John also has a less extreme side. When the crowds ask him what they should do to repent, he doesn't tell them to give up everything they have and follow him into the desert. He gives them manageable, practical advice. "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." He tells tax collectors to be honest, and soldiers not to bully people and extort money. All quite moderate. And not nearly as much as Jesus will ask of his disciples.

So there's something of a gap between John's message and his behaviour. And this seems to me to say something important about who he is; his place in this story.

John is a prophet. When he was born, according to Luke, his father Zechariah praised God in a song, saying, "You, child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High: for you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways. To give knowledge of salvation to his people, for the forgiveness of their sins..."

Like Jesus, John grows up knowing he has a mission, though not exactly what it will be. And like Jesus, when he is grown up, he goes out into the desert. Perhaps like Jesus, he goes to pray, to prepare himself, to overcome his own demons, so that he is ready to fight other people's. And then, Luke says, the Word of God comes to John in the desert, and he starts preaching and baptizing people.

So John needs to go to into the desert to understand his mission. And he needs to stay there to fulfil it. Because to get the kind of perspective on the world that a prophet needs, you have to stand apart from it a bit. When we're in the middle of life, busy, thinking about food and family and all the practical things, we don't have time to stop and think, what really matters? Am I living as I should? Prophets do that for us, and to do it they have to stand apart.

So John lives in the desert to see the rest of the world more clearly. But seeing the world, and telling it to change, is a lonely business, and one of the things that strikes me about

John is what a lonely figure he is. He isn't the one that everyone's been waiting for. He exists to point away from himself, towards Jesus. We do occasionally hear that he has disciples, but we don't know anything about them. Whenever we hear about John, he really seems to be alone.

It's a difficult position, and John's role in the gospel story is a hard one. He was the first man to recognize Jesus. In Jesus's lifetime, John was the only other person really to understand his mission. John repented of his sins and lived a good life, he preached forgiveness to other people and baptized them, he looked for the coming of the Kingdom. John was the one person apart from Jesus who really knew what was going on, and yet he was never part of Jesus's community of the children of God.

St. John's gospel catches the poignancy of his position, in the story he tells about the priests and Levites coming from Jerusalem to ask John who he is. Are you the Messiah? they ask? Are you Elijah? And John says, no, "I am the voice of one who cries in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord." Not even a name. Just a voice.

And he died before he could see the results of what he had helped to start. Like Jesus, he gave his life for others – and he never knew for certain whether the mission had succeeded.

So John stands lonely between the old and the new in the gospel story. He's the light that points out of the darkness, but burns out before the day comes.

On the other hand, his life was also richly fulfilled. More than anyone else, he created the conditions in which Jesus could be heard. He told people they should be looking for the Messiah. He prepared the way in people's hearts and minds. Without John, you wonder whether so many people would have been ready to listen to Jesus. If John hadn't been baptizing in the Jordan, you wonder whether Jesus would have come along, and received the Spirit and begun his mission when he did. John wasn't there to see what happened to Jesus, but he did more than almost anyone to make it happen.

And although he died waiting for the Kingdom, in some ways he must have been already there. Later on in Luke's gospel, Jesus will tell the disciples, The Kingdom of Heaven is within you, and surely the Kingdom of Heaven was already in John. He had heard God, and he knew what his life was for. He understood other people – what their motives were and what they should do to be saved. Like Simeon in the Temple, John's eyes had seen the salvation of the Lord. When he saw Jesus coming to be baptized, he knew who he was looking at. And to have heard God and seen Christ is a lot for one lifetime.

I don't know about you, but John the Baptist is not a figure that I have ever thought to identify with – in the way that lots of people feel some empathy with Mary, for instance, or Simon Peter. But actually, I think we should. For a start, there are still prophets among us, who see that the world is not as it should be, and say so. And that is still a lonely and difficult thing to do. As we honour John for his part in this story, it reminds us to listen for the prophets among us today, and honour them and take notice of them.

And whether we're prophets or just disciples, nearly all of us die without knowing whether the things that we have hoped for, and believed in, and worked all our lives to bring about, will happen. John is a model for us here, too. In fact, Luke is full of people – from Elizabeth and Zechariah to Simeon and Anna to John himself, the Christmas story is full of people who won't live to see the end of God's work on earth, but are full of joy and gratitude to have seen the beginning of it. And if they can rejoice, so can we. We may not see the Kingdom in our lifetime, but we have seen the signs of it; we have heard it's coming.

There is another way in which John can be an inspiration to us. He was capable of doubt, of wobbling in his faith. At the beginning of Matthew's gospel, when Jesus comes to be baptized, John recognizes him and protests, "It is I who should be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (3.14) And yet in chapter 11, when John is in prison, he sends word to Jesus, saying, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" It seems extraordinary, when all the signs were that John knew who Jesus was the moment he met him. Did John not understand some of the things Jesus was doing? Was his faith shaken by the fact that his own life was in danger? You couldn't blame him - even Jesus himself, on the cross, will say, My God, why have you forsaken me?

Whatever the reason for John's loss of confidence, it reminds us that in this story even the best have moments of weakness. And that is also helpful to know. Because at this time of year, it's so easy to get despondent and feel everything is grey and dark and uncertain and comes to nothing. John knew that feeling. But he also knew the words which he had borrowed from Isaiah: "Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." And he was right. Amen

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