

3rd Sunday in Advent

15 Dec 19

**Ps 146:4-9; James 5: 7-10
Matthew 11: 2-11**

It's a strange time of year, December. Whilst much of the month is focused on Christmas, anticipation, preparation, celebration, there's also the sense of reaching the end of one year, looking back, and approaching a new year, looking forward. This year, December has been hi-jacked by a general election campaign and we now find ourselves reflecting, along with at least one party leader, on what has been and what lies ahead.

It reminds me of trying to cross the road in a city centre with traffic coming from all directions and seeing the words painted on the tarmac: LOOK BOTH WAYS. You have to be aware of several lanes of traffic, looking back and forward.

Today we will focus on John the Baptist, who in his life and ministry did just that, he LOOKED BOTH WAYS.

John is the last of the Old Testament prophets in the bible. The last one to point people to Jesus, the one who ran the last leg of that very long race, continuing in the footsteps of Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Hosea, Micah and all the rest... urging and challenging God's people to prepare for the Messiah, their King and Saviour. The last, and as Jesus says in today's reading from Matthew, the greatest. As we know, and rather take for granted, John's ministry was both to preach and baptise.

He preached the need to repent, to seek God's forgiveness, to turn around, turn back to God. Much as his predecessors had done, though with a real urgency- The Kingdom of God is 'at hand' – right here, and now!

And John baptised-he dunked people in the river, offering baptism, which did not, and still does not, feature in the Jewish faith, but which connected so clearly to the story of Joshua leading the people across the Jordan to enter the Promised Land.

John's baptism, evoking this, was a sign of receiving God's forgiveness, being washed clean, making a fresh start.

Up until John's day, forgiveness in the Jewish religion had been obtained through temple sacrifices of birds and animals which had to be bought, using Temple currency and necessitating the infamous money changers whom Jesus drove out. Sacrifices were at the heart of a lucrative and complex system administered through the priests.

But John came, not to the temple in the city but to the Jordan in the wilderness, and offered people the chance to experience forgiveness in a very memorable and personal way, free of charge. No need to pay anything, all that was needed was a change of *heart*.

Thus John called people to LOOK BOTH WAYS: to look back in repentance, reflecting honestly on their lives and recognising their need for God, and then to look forward, to receive forgiveness and entrust their future to Him.

And as he talked about the future he told them that the One who was coming soon, the Messiah, would baptise them with the Holy Spirit and fire. The Christ would bring them power to live holy lives in relationship with God, would reignite their faith and, in the words we say in Morning Prayer, 'set our hearts of fire' with love for him. We know too, as we remember in this service, that Jesus himself would be the one true sacrifice for sin, giving his life to redeem all people for all time. John's freely offered baptism points to all of this.

Such preaching got John into hot water! Like the great prophet he was, like many prophets before him, and as Sabine reminded us so powerfully last week, John spoke the truth fearlessly, no matter how powerful or important the audience. So it was that John told King Herod Antipas, that his behaviour was out of order when he dumped his first wife to marry his sister in law, and in doing so broke at least 3 Levitical laws... John's criticism resulted in incarceration, for Herod was no more willing to hear the truth than political leaders of our day. And some time later, the same situation and people were responsible for John's summary execution. In today's gospel reading, we meet John in prison.

Can we imagine the agony of this, not only the physical deprivations, but the frustration and anger, to be taken out of action, stopped in his tracks, cut off from

friends, family, news... but his friends keep in touch- and he sends them to Jesus to ask the question that is nagging away, breaking his heart, as he sits for long hours alone in his cell, looking both ways in his mind's eye.

John must have replayed his whole life- the stories his parents told him of his miraculous birth when they were in their nineties; the angel telling his father Zechariah that the baby they'd longed for, but given up hope of, was finally coming, and how old Zech was struck dumb at the news. He replayed God- fearing, humble and loving childhood, the times he heard about his mother's cousin, Mary, and her first son, Jesus, and wondered if they would ever meet, if their lives would intersect. Then as John reached adulthood, how he began to understand more clearly his calling from God, that the passion he felt was God-given, propelling him into the desert to pray, fast and at last, when he sensed the time had come, to preach and baptise. And John remembered, more vividly than any other day of his life, when Jesus himself came to the Jordan and asked to be baptised.

But as he sat in prison he wondered... was it really true? Is Jesus really the Messiah? Or was it all in vain?

And so he sent word to Jesus to ask just that:

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

Notice, John still firmly believes the Messiah will come: if it isn't Jesus there will be someone else.

And Jesus sends him back the answer which satisfies John's longing and hoping, wipes away his fears, restores his hope... But before we focus on that answer, I want to divert briefly to what else Jesus says, to the watching crowd.

They've sensed a bit of a rift between Jesus and John. Some have followed John and are now with Jesus, changing allegiance from the wild prophet to the northern preacher, whose gang of followers who are more sociable and welcoming, less judgmental....

So Jesus challenges their motives: What did you expect, out here in the wilderness?

A reed shaken by the wind: that is, nothing unusual, someone blending in, going with the crowd? Hardly, this is a prophet, not a bird watcher!

Or, says Jesus, did you expect someone in silk robes and expensive shoes, not equipped to live and work here? Of course not! John is dressed for the desert survival: he'd get on well with Ray Mears or Bear Grylls. John's in exactly the right place at the right time, at the very moment his people have been waiting for, the 'intersection of the timeless with time' as the poet put it, when Messiah arrives. All of John's life has led to this, he has heard God for this time, this place, this people. He is more than a prophet because he has seen the great prophecies fulfilled in his own lifetime, in Jesus, whom he has baptised. Perhaps he even heard the voice of God and saw the Spirit descending... but we will save further reflection on that for January.

Jesus continues to tell them about John and there's a surprise here: the least in the Kingdom of heaven is greater than John. Jesus *isn't* saying that John is outside the Kingdom of God, but that there are no celebrities in his Kingdom, not even the greatest prophet, because the first are last and the last first. John may have played a key role but that doesn't give him special status, or protect him from persecution. Jesus has strong words for the crowd. He's not a Superman Messiah, any more that John is a superhero prophet, they have come to serve God, preach the truth, live and die by it.

But let us return, in closing, to the message which John received as his friends took him word from Jesus:

Tell John what you hear and see: that is, what is happening now, not a memory of a hope but a present reality.

*Tell him that the 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.*

And, Jesus adds, *blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.* He's telling John that he will divide people, his message will not be popular or comfortable. There will be those who take offence because Jesus doesn't fit their expectations or share their

religious priorities. But God's blessing is freely given to all who are open to hear his good news. All are welcome into God's kingdom, not just a select elite.

What an answer for John to hear! This is the proof he needs that Jesus is indeed the Messiah.

The healings, the new life, the good news, and the opposition too, all these were foretold by the prophets- Jesus' words echo Isaiah chapter 35 which we heard earlier. Micah, Zephaniah and Hosea also refer to these miracles, although none mentions the cleansing of lepers, which we know was a striking part of Jesus' ministry as he travelled around.

I think that's significant because it was a very contemporary example of those who were excluded being welcomed, healed, rehabilitated into society. It reminds me of Princess Diana's very visible reaching out to AIDS victims in the 1990s, which caused offence but changed the prevailing culture. Jesus' response to lepers did that in his day.

Today Christians and churches are called to reach out to those marginalised by poverty and debt, through foodbanks, debt counselling, friendship and compassion, changing the prevailing culture, bringing the good news of the kingdom. What will that challenge look like for you and me, for us as a church?

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Jesus gives the perfect answer to the great question in John's heart because he knows that for John the prophet, this answer will make sense of who John is, his calling, his commitment and his heart.

And I imagine that for John, Jesus's words are like water in the desert, bringing life, strength, hope.

Past and future, the looking back and the looking forward are brought together into the glorious present of Jesus's answer to John. He may still be in prison, but his heart is set free.

We've thought today about LOOKING BOTH WAYS.

John's agonised reflections in his cell led him to the massive question he asked Jesus: *Who are you, really?*

It may be as we look back over this year, this week even, and as we look forward to Christmas and into a new decade and all it holds for ourselves, our family, community, nation, world, we too are led to ask:

Jesus, who are you? Can you truly be the Messiah, the Saviour who makes sense of the past and future, and brings life and hope in the present?

As we seek Christ's answer to us, may we like John receive his life-giving word today.

Amen.