

## **The Birth of St John the Baptist**

### **26<sup>th</sup> June 2022**

#### *Invocation*

On 24<sup>th</sup> June 1907 something important happened. The first work began on this church, and St John the Baptist became our patron saint, and what a patron saint to have.

But first, I was wondering if you can help me out. You see I was told in theological college that on the day when a church celebrates its patron saint, you just have to link something about the saint to the congregation.

So, I thought after 9 months of being your Vicar that I would have a go

Now I know from living in Harpenden that people who live here like their food and drink, so I thought that would be the best place to start, and see if anyone likes to eat like John the Baptist?

So, hands up if you like honey – here is some of David Brown's local honey – this is looking promising.

Hands up if you like locusts! That's right – locusts! [maybe you can try afterwards]

So, if not food, perhaps then it is the person who most looks like John the Baptist – as you'll see from our icon...there doesn't seem to be anyone (unless you count the vicar just before he gets his hair cut!) or unless anyone here want to confess to wearing an item made with camel hair? No?

Maybe then, I need to look not at what he looked like or what he ate, but the person he was. And boy do we know a lot!

He is revered not just in Christianity but in Islam, Baha'i Faith, the Druze and Mandaeanism.

St John the Baptist is one of the most important saints in the Church. Aside from Mary and Jesus – he has the most feast days in the Church of England. He appears in all the gospels, and we hear his birth was probably more miraculous than that of Jesus – after all Elizabeth was well beyond childbearing age. In fact, the start of Luke's gospel is so full of the story of John, some might even read it and think the gospel was about him. We know he baptised Jesus – which was a sign of his importance, which Jesus submits to – and this baptism marks the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Like Jesus, we also know of his death as well.

John was a man who lived a life on the edge, at odds with normal of society and preached a message of repentance and about the kinds of people God calls into his kingdom. He helped to prepare the way for Jesus – and is recorded as the first person who knows Jesus to be the 'Lamb of God' (hence why you will see lots of lambs around this church). And because he appears so often, we also pick up snippets of his teaching and what he stood for.

Like us, John also lived during a time of great turmoil. There was uncertainty, plagues, violence, wars. There were the very wealthy and the very poor. People were looking for the message of hope and life, in what was a barren and unfair world. John was not that light – but he did guide and direct people to the light.

I think all these things speak to us as we seek to re-align ourselves with what God yearns for us to be in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and I think what God call us all to be here at St John's and in Southdown.

First, inspired by John the Baptist, God calls us to be people who prepare the way for Jesus. John the Baptist has many other names, and one name is John the Forerunner. In the beginning of John's gospel we hear him describe the other John as 'a man sent from God'... 'who was sent to testify to the light'. We are called like John not to be the light, but to show people the light. We are called to show people the light which is Jesus but also the hope and life that Jesus brings and for signs of his new kingdom. Where and how do we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, home the homeless, help the refugee, defend the helpless, and protect the vulnerable?

Second, inspired by John the Baptist, God calls us to be people who proclaim God's truth. John was not one to mince his words. He calls people who came to him 'broods of vipers' and that the 'chaff will be burnt with unquenchable fire'. John was not a politician, but he called out the rulers of the world when they took the wrong path (and it cost him his life too). Sometimes speaking the truth is uncomfortable, sacrificial, or hard – both inside and outside the church. Sometimes we confuse our own truth with God's – its easily done. But if we are not seeking to proclaim God's truth, which include justice, compassion and love – then what in His name are we doing?

Third, inspired by John the Baptist, God calls us to be a church for all sorts, with only one requirement – we try our best to turn to God. Luckily, he does not call us to wear camel shirts or eat locusts - but he does call us to love those who are different from us but are part of his kingdom. He calls us to place our trust in him, and that being a Christian isn't about being part of the crowd but knowing that each of us has a place at the table and needs to be heard for this place to flourish.

*To prepare the way*

*To proclaim God's truth*

*To be a church for all who turn to Him*

We are here today because over the last 150 years plus Christians in Southdown have been prepared to do just that, and this church is a living testament that that faith has not been misplaced.

Today, as we celebrate the Patronal Feast, we ask John the Baptist, and all the saints to pray for us, that in the years ahead, we might place our trust for this place, for our new Parish Centre and all that lies ahead, not with the Vicar, not in yourself, not even with that of John the Baptist – but with our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Amen.