

Talk for Advent 3 – John the Baptist

‘He thundered the impending doom across the Jordan Valley.’ Unyielding as Elijah, as fierce as Amos he threatened judgment and demanded a new beginning. He preached hellfire and they came in droves. And Jesus came to be baptised.

This was John the Baptist- the last of the great Old Testament prophets. He called the crowds broods of vipers, he warned of the wrath to come- he preached of repentance, he warned of God coming in judgement to sort the trees that bore good fruit from those that bore bad fruit.

He was ruthless in his condemnation of the people urging them to turn back to God before the Messiah came to God’s people.

And Jesus came to be baptised.

Soldiers and tax collectors came and ask what to do to repent. They were told ;‘collect only what is due, do not use extortion or by lying- be satisfied with your wages and what you have.’

People asked if he was the Messiah, but he said there was one coming whose sandals he was not worthy to tie. ***And Jesus came to be baptised.***

John was not the messiah he was the one the Gospel writer, John referred to in the opening of his Gospel; *The voice crying in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.*

John the prophet heralding the Messiah Jesus. But John was not like the earlier prophets who foretold the coming of the Messiah, they had no idea who he would be or when he would come. It would be sometime in the future.

But John knew who the Messiah would be, he knew him, they were not strangers, they were cousin. John’s mother Elizabeth was cousin to Mary, the mother of Jesus. And there were similarities between them

Their births were somewhat controversial. According to the beginning of Luke’s Gospel, John was the only son of Zachariah a temple high priest and Elizabeth his wife who was unable to have children .Yet when Zachariah was alone in the inner temple he was visited by the Angel Gabriel. who frightened the life out of him. Gabriel said ; *“Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”*

Zachariah had the temerity to argue this with Gabriel who was not used to having humans question him so he struck Zachariah dumb until the birth of John. Poor old Zachariah came out of the inner temple, tried to indicate what had happened to him, gave up and went home. Much to Elizabeth’s surprise she found she was pregnant with her longed -for child not realising he would spend his adult life proclaiming the coming of the Messiah and would do exactly what Gabriel had foretold- *He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God’*

Just a short while later Mary also had a visitation from Gabriel ,, but accepted what he said . “I am the Lord’s servant. May your

word to me be fulfilled.” Mary trusted God and like Elizabeth had a strong faith in God. Both women had sons gifted by God and both suffered the horror of having their sons killed in an horrific way. John and Jesus shared unusual births and barbaric deaths.

According to Luke when Mary went to visit her cousin, the baby in leapt for joy in Elizabeth’s womb, it seems he recognised his cousin at that incredibly early age.

John’s birth was probably straight forward but we know Jesus was more dramatic. It’s not every child born has a star over their birthplace or receive visits from shepherds and wise men. But when we get past all the events around Christmas nothing more is heard of either Jesus or John, until they are adult.

John’s life was of an itinerant preacher, wearing animal skins and living off the land. He had quite a following and it is thought some of Jesus’ disciples were formally followers of John. Jesus was unheard of until he started his ministry, and he became a wandering preaching moving from village to village. The difference between them is, John was the prophet who came before Jesus to prepare the way for him, Jesus was the Messiah he heralded.

And Jesus came to be baptised.

John had been baptising people in the Jordan, telling them to repent and prepare themselves for the coming Messiah. The people began to wonder if John might possibly be the Messiah. John answered them all, *“I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”*

The Messiah would baptise them with the Holy Spirit from God but will separate the good from the bad, the true believers will receive the promise of eternal life. That is real hellfire preaching. It must have put the fear of God in them.

Then Jesus came to be baptised. This shocked John. Why would one who was the Son of God and above reproach want to be baptised and cleansed of his sins. Jesus was baptised to show he was fully human and not a superhero.

As Jesus starts his ministry, so John stops prophesying and baptising and turn his attention to King Herod. More than once, John the Baptist had rebuked King Herod for divorcing his wife and marrying his niece Herodias, who had been his brother Philip’s wife. Philip was still living, and both Philip and Antipas were uncles to Herodias—for several reasons, then, Herod’s marriage to Herodias was a violation of God’s law. John paid the price for upsetting him and was beheaded; the details are well know.

John was the last of the line of the great prophets, He did not foresee how Jesus’ ministry would be- one of love, and healing, of forgiveness. I think John expected a Messiah who would free the people from Roman oppression and lead the people back to God and to independence. Later doubts creep into John’s mind when he is in prison, until he is reassured by Jesus that he really is the Son of God. John can teach us how to recognise Jesus who is coming again to us in two weeks. The better we know Jesus and grow and learn with him the more easily we shall recognise him when he comes to us in our worship, our prayers, our moments of quiet. And, please God help us to humble welcome him into our hearts. Amen