

Letting Go

The Birth of John the Baptist

[Luke 1: 57-66, 80](#), [Isaiah 40: 1-11](#), [Acts 13: 14-26](#)



The word “decluttering” sends a shiver down my spine.

I find it very difficult to throw things away because they might come in useful one day. Sometimes I am right, and a particular object or book proves its worth, justifying its place in a cupboard or on a shelf. I wonder if you have got little stashes of items which you can’t bring yourself to consign to the recycling or donate to charity shops, those things which are fraught with memories and associations, or those which might

simply come in handy one day.

However, God calls us to let go of some of the things which we hold dear in order to follow him. The call to repentance is a call to let go of these things which can clutter up our hearts and distract us from being the people who God calls us to be. Our reading from Isaiah, which Luke links to John the Baptist, gives us a very powerful picture of this, as the voice in the desert calls out, “Prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.” (v. 3)

There is nothing timid about this call. It is a desire for us to give God full access to our lives. Instead of creating a little, meandering pathway, this is a bulldozer at work. This is a challenging and uncomfortable image. There is no space for compromise. Everything which we might think of as being fixed and settled in the landscape is turned upside down: verse 4 describes how the valleys will be raised up, the mountains made low and the rough ground level.

However, there is very little in the story of John the Baptist which is comfortable or based on compromise. His birth and life demonstrate God’s irresistible drive, bulldozing through human expectations. Elizabeth is unable to have children, and she and Zechariah are “well on in years.” Who would expect them to become parents in their old age? Certainly not Zechariah. The people expect the baby to be named after his father or another family member, but Zechariah, silenced because he doubted God’s plans, has his tongue loosened as he agrees that the child will be called John.

All of the people in this account of John’s birth have to let go of their preconceptions and give way to God’s energy and purpose. Even the boy’s name, points to this. The name “John” means “God is gracious”, and everything he does is to demonstrate that grace.

In our reading from Acts, Paul explains that “Before the coming of Jesus, John preached repentance and baptism to all the people of Israel.” (v. 24) John was beginning the act of decluttering amongst the Jews in readiness for the coming of Jesus. Paul then takes the good news of Jesus far beyond its original base, both geographically and to Gentiles as well as Jews.

This message of repentance is a call to let go of our expectations, which we may cling to dearly. It means that we turn back, rather than continue in our old ways. This can be the hardest thing to do: we have to admit that we’ve got things wrong. We have to set aside all that we’ve clung to, and hand over control to God, because it’s not all about us. We are called to let go and declutter.

This doesn’t mean that I have to get rid of all the books on my shelves, or cast away all the photos and items gifted and gathered over the years in order to make my house a minimalist showcase. However, reflecting on our Bible readings as we remember the birth of John the Baptist does present us with a call to look again at our lives, and to invite God to help us let go of those things which block his path.

You may find this prayer by St Ignatius of Loyola helpful:

*Take, Lord,
and receive all my liberty,
my memory,
my understanding
and my entire will,
all that I have and possess.
You have given all to me
to you, Lord, I return it.
All is yours;
do with it what you will.
Give me only your love
and your grace,
that is enough for me.*

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