

Advent 3 12 December 2010

John the Baptist

When you have a VIP visit your school or lab or office there is a lot of preparation that needs to happen. Some visitors are so important that they have people in their office whose task it is to plan these visits and make sure everything is OK on the day. The people that are going to be visited are ready, the car park space has been reserved, the red carpet is rolled out, senior staff are ready to greet the visitor. You know the drill. When God visits Earth as Jesus Christ he needs someone to prepare the people for his coming. That man is John the Baptist.

He is so important that Luke records his birth story to show that he was born of God with a major task to do in God's mission to our world. The story starts with his parents who in old age were still childless. His father Zechariah was a priest and while he was on duty he had a vision of the Angel Gabriel who told him that his prayers for a child were about to be answered. Elizabeth his wife was about to fall pregnant in her old age. They were to call the child John - a gift from God or the answer to prayer - he was to be brought up as a lifelong Nazarite, a person dedicated to God who was not to drink strong drink or cut his hair, and his task was to turn people's hearts to God, *to make ready a people ready for the Lord (Luke 1.17)*. Zechariah can't believe his ears and says so, so Gabriel tells him he will be mute till the child is born. When he is born and the

time comes to circumcise him on the 8th day the people gathered have a dispute about the name. Elizabeth is the only one who can speak so she says his name is John. But the crowd doesn't like this much - it is not a family name - so they try to call him Zechariah after his father. Zechariah himself writes *his name is John* (Luke 1.63) and immediately can speak and bursts into song in which he praises God for all God's works and then prophesies over the child saying *you my child shall be called the prophet of the most high, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins* (Luke 1.76-7). We are then told the child grows up living in the wilderness - the place that is associated with Elijah listening to God. In our Advent Study book, Paula Gooder makes much of this birth and naming. The story as Luke tells is steeped in the tradition - it is written in a way that will call to mind other birth stories such as the birth of **Isaac** the child of promise to parents who are of great age; the birth of **Samson** who is a rather wild character whose birth to barren parents is announced by an angel, and Samson is also a saviour, and the birth of **Samuel** who brings his people back to God and anoints the first king of Israel, Saul, and then his replacement, David. By writing the story of John's birth in such a way as to call these other stories to mind Luke is saying John is deeply entwined with the promises of God - one to pay a great deal of attention to. In addition he is equated to Israel's greatest prophet, Elijah who stood up for God at a time when few else were.

The next we hear of John is about 30 years later. He preaches in the Jordan valley a message that the Kingdom of heaven is near and the Jewish people need to repent of their sins and be baptised so that they can receive the Messiah when he comes. It is a very forthright urgent preaching, challenging people to mend their lives in often very practical ways. He continually directs attention away from himself to the one who is to come who is *more powerful than he is* and *whose sandal he is not worthy to untie* (Luke 3.16) -- the task of a slave.

This baptism and repentance is the preparation that the people need right now so that they are ready to meet the one who is greater than John is. The way John baptises is revolutionary. Jews were used to ritual washings and Gentiles who became converts underwent a form of baptism. But both the washings and the baptism of converts were self administered. The washings were ritual washings to get rid of ritual pollution but they didn't deal with sin. John did something different; **he** did the baptising which made it a communal action. And it is a repentance baptism, in the Jordan, the river they crossed to enter the Promised Land at the end of the Exodus, and is associated with forgiveness of sin **outside** temple sacrifices - shocking to Jews at that time but great for those who couldn't afford the financial cost of sacrifices. So John's preaching and baptism prepares the hearts of the people to receive the messiah by turning their hearts to God; and this is always the preparation process - to receive the gift of life you have to be able to face the giver.

John's preaching is always to the people of God. He preaches to the church or synagogue, not to outsiders. He preaches to us in Advent.

His preaching pays no regard for person; even the King, Herod Antipas, comes in for stick for marrying his sister-in-law, clearly contrary to the law. We hear that he is imprisoned for it.

While he is in prison Jesus starts his ministry and he preaches the same message as John about repentance, and that the rule of God is at hand and urges people to believe the good news. This is accompanied by healings of various sorts - sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, lepers cleansed, lame walking and unclean spirits being cast out. In the passage we heard today John sends messengers to Jesus asking a rather strange question: *Are you the one who is to come or do we wait for another? (Luke 7.19)*. Because we just have the words with no indication of tone of voice it is difficult to know what kind of question this is - does he doubt his original discernment? There may be some truth in that. John preached things about the messiah which suggest the messiah was coming as a judge to winnow his people, sorting the wheat from the chaff, and the chaff will be burned with unquenchable fire (*Luke 3.17*). Jesus' actions are somewhat different. Has John got it right? Is Jesus the messiah? The answer from Jesus invites John to make up his mind based on what he sees and hears about Jesus' ministry which is expressed in a list of deeds. Those lists sound like three passages from Isaiah and other prophets which could help

John see Jesus' actions as the fulfilment of prophecy and also the work of the messiah. We are not told whether John was convinced and that doesn't matter. What the lack of information about John's subsequent belief suggests is that this is a question we have to answer for ourselves - is this Jesus the one we are waiting for?

Jesus then sums up John. John is a *prophet and more than a prophet* (Luke 7.26), he is the forerunner of the messiah, he prepares the way. And then this strange statement: *I tell you of those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he* (Luke 7.28). Paula Gooder suggests that the greatness of John lies in the fact that he fulfilled the task he had been given by God through the promise given through Gabriel before John was conceived. So to live out our calling is a very important thing for each one of us to do. Like John we are witnesses to Jesus. We too in our age point away from ourselves to the messiah who has saved us. We too in our age help to prepare the way for God to enter the hearts of men and women and children, the poor, the marginalised. The least in the kingdom of God are greater than he is - these are the poor, maimed, sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors who become first in the kingdom because the values in the kingdom are upside down compared with the values of the world - the first shall be last, the last first. Those who want to be great must be the slaves of all, leaders don't lord it over others but are the servants of all. It sounds like John might

be excluded from the Kingdom of God - far from it. He is right in there with the great prophets. It is just that those we call least are in there too and have higher status in the topsy-turvy values of the kingdom.

John's story invites us to ask questions of ourselves about

how we live - do we fulfil our vocation as witnesses;

what our values are - what do we see as great? how do we work within the upside-down values of God's rule;

what we believe about Jesus - is he the one we wait for;

and how prepared are we to turn to God in order to receive Jesus into our lives, not just as the baby born in a stable in Bethlehem, but also as Lord and saviour;

how open are we to receive Jesus in the Eucharist Sunday by Sunday?