

MATTHEW 11:2-11
ST JOHN'S, 11.12.16, 9.30 am

INTRODUCTION

Our journey through Advent has already brought us to the patriarchs, and then to the prophets. Today we think about John the Baptist, and next week about Mary, each of whom had a part to play in preparing for the first coming of Christ.

So as we focus on John the Baptist today, let's think about what we know about him. Luke tells us that his parents were called Zechariah and Elizabeth. Zechariah was a priest, and Elizabeth *also belonged to a priestly family* (Luke 1:5). So they were members of the tribe of Levi, and descended from Aaron. *They both lived good lives in God's sight and obeyed fully all the Lord's laws and commands* (Luke 1:6). But they weren't able to have children.

When Zechariah was an old man, and Elizabeth an old woman, the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah while he was on duty in the Temple. Gabriel told him that Elizabeth was to bear him a son, who would be called John. *He will be a great man in the Lord's sight . . . from his very birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, and he will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. He will go ahead of the Lord, strong and mighty like the prophet Elijah . . . he will get the Lord's people ready for him* (Luke 1:15-17).

After John was born, Zechariah prophesied about him in the song we know as the Benedictus (we've just sung a version of it): *You, my child,*

will be called a prophet of the Most High God. You will go ahead of the Lord to prepare his road for him, to tell his people that they will be saved by having their sins forgiven (Luke 1:76-77).

Luke goes on to tell us that John *grew and developed in body and spirit. He lived in the desert until the day when he appeared publicly to the people of Israel* (Luke 1:80).

JOHN IS ELIJAH

Looking at today's passage, Jesus says quite a lot about John the Baptist. But Jesus hasn't finished all he wants to say at the end of the verses we heard. He carries on for another four verses, and in verse 14, he says this: *if you are willing to believe [the message of the prophets] John is Elijah, whose coming was predicted.*

Jesus is referring to a prophecy made by Malachi, right at the end of the OT: *But before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes, I will send you the prophet Elijah . . .* (Malachi 4:5). This prophecy was very familiar to the people of Jesus' time: they interpreted it to mean that the prophet Elijah would return before the Messiah came. John clearly wasn't literally Elijah reborn. But he did share Elijah's lifestyle: he lived in the desert, wearing *clothes . . . made of camel's hair, and a leather belt round his waist* (Matthew 3:4, cf 2 Kings 1:8), as Elijah did. This all ties in with the message which Gabriel gave to Zechariah concerning John.

JOHN THE BAPTIST

The first time Matthew mentions John the Baptist is in chapter 3 (we heard it in last week's Gospel reading): *At that time John the Baptist came to the desert of Judea and started preaching* (3:1). Matthew relates John's ministry to a different prophecy; not Malachi, but Isaiah: *John was the man the prophet Isaiah was talking about when he said: "Someone is shouting in the desert, 'Prepare a road for the Lord; make a straight path for him to travel!'"* (3:3). John's preaching was very much in the style of the OT prophets. He called people to turn away from their sins, and turn to God. As a sign of their repentance, he baptised people in the river Jordan.

Baptism wasn't something new. Gentiles who wanted to convert to the Jewish faith were baptised as part of the conversion process. But telling *Jewish* people that they needed to be baptised as a sign of turning away from their sin was truly shocking. Even so, there was a huge spiritual hunger among the people, and they came in their crowds to hear John and to be baptised. And of course, among those crowds came Jesus too.

Matthew mentions John only once more before today's passage. In 4:12, we read *When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison . . .* We know he's still in prison in chapter 11, but we don't learn why until chapter 14. Herod, the ruler of Galilee, had ordered that John be arrested and thrown in prison because *for some time John . . . had told Herod, "It isn't right for you to be married to Herodias!"* Herodias had been married to Herod's brother. Herod had seduced her, divorced his

own wife, and lured Herodias to leave her husband and marry him. John didn't pull his punches, even when it came to those in power. And so, he was in prison.

JOHN THE BAPTIST AND JESUS

John must have heard from his prison cell what Jesus was doing. It wasn't what John expected! John knew that Jesus was the Messiah. In the fourth gospel, John gives this testimony about Jesus' baptism: *I saw the Spirit come down like a dove from heaven and stay on him . . . I tell you that he is the Son of God* (John 1:32,34). But as we read last week, John expected the Messiah to baptise *with the Holy Spirit and fire; to gather his wheat into his barn, and burn the chaff in a fire that never goes out* (Matthew 3:11,12). Like most people in Judea at that time, John probably expected the Messiah to be a military leader, driving out the Romans, toppling King Herod, establishing himself as King in his place, and releasing John himself. Instead, Jesus was giving the blind their sight, enabling the lame to walk, healing people, bringing the dead to life, and preaching the Good News to the poor.

John was confused by the things which Jesus was doing. They weren't the things which John expected the Messiah to do. But Jesus wasn't confused about John. He says plenty here about John: firstly, who he isn't: *a blade of grass bending in the wind* – he's not weak and pliable, and neither is he anything like Herod, whose emblem on coins was a Galilean reed waving in the wind. John wasn't *dressed up in fancy clothes* like people *who live in palaces*. Then Jesus turns to who John is: *a prophet . . . but . . . much more than a prophet*. Jesus confirms

that John is the one prophesied by Malachi, and then goes on to say, *I assure you that John the Baptist is greater than anyone who has ever lived.*

CONCLUSION

But, Jesus adds: *the one who is least in the Kingdom of heaven is greater than John.* John belonged to the old covenant. He was an OT prophet, charged to call the people to turn away from their sins, and turn back to God; to warn them that if they failed to do this, they were like chaff which would be burned *in a fire that never goes out* (Matthew 3:12). He expected Jesus to be another prophet in the same tradition.

But the OT also contains many messages about what will happen *after* judgment. We've heard this morning from Isaiah: *the blind will be able to see, and the deaf will hear. The lame will leap and dance, and those who cannot speak will shout for joy* (Isaiah 35:5-6). These are the kinds of things which will happen when the kingdom of heaven breaks in. These are the kinds of things which start happening when Jesus comes on the scene. The new covenant is now starting to operate, Jesus says. But John isn't part of that new covenant, he's not 'in' the kingdom of heaven in that sense.

John that Baptist was courageous, he was faithful, he was the greatest of the prophets, *greater than anyone who had ever lived* before him. At the end of the old covenant, he was called to herald the new, but not to be part of it. It's not really surprising that he found Jesus' agenda hard to accept. To his credit, he didn't just write Jesus off. He sent his disciples to ask Jesus to explain.

There are many, many people throughout history, who've also found Jesus' agenda hard to accept. The question we need to ask this morning is what about us? Does Jesus' agenda meet our expectations? Are we looking for a Saviour who's like an OT prophet, preaching hell-fire and damnation? Or maybe we've bought into the myth of 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild'? In our culture, there are many, many people who never allow Jesus to grow up: he's forever wrapped in swaddling bands and lying in a manger.

But Jesus Christ doesn't fit into any of our cosy little boxes. He's nothing like anyone expected the Messiah to be. He's nothing like anyone *expects* the Messiah to be. If we want to know him, then like John the Baptist, we need to take into account the whole of Scripture, not just the bits we're familiar with. Like John the Baptist, we need to be open to Jesus surprising us, turning our assumptions and prejudices inside out and upside down. Like John the Baptist, we need to be open to the Lord doing things differently, working in unexpected places, with unexpected people, in unexpected ways.