

[1] **Crying in the Wilderness**

St. John's Presbyterian, Mt. Roskill

Sermon Topic: Prophets – John the Baptist

Sunday 23rd Sept 2018

Readings: Psalm 103, Isaiah 40:1-8, Luke 3:1-20, John 1:19-28

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[2] Imagine looking at earth from space, then zooming in on the Middle East, then into [3] Israel and then down to the Jordan desert near the Dead Sea. There a lone voice is crying out in the wilderness, [4] a voice whose message has come from the heavens, a voice that speaks life from the desolate places, the voice of a weird looking individual attired as one of the ancient prophets that had disappeared over four hundred years ago. This is John the Baptist, dressed in a harsh camel-hair robe, eating honey and locusts. The Jewish-Roman historian Josephus records that John commanded *“the Jews to exercise virtue, righteousness towards one another and piety towards God”* (Jewish Antiquities 18:117). To turn from injustice to justice, from sin to repentance, to live lives worthy of God. Jesus, in Matthew 11:11, tells us that John was the greatest of all the prophets, certainly the culmination of a long prophetic tradition pointing to the Messiah. John's ministry was one that traced a geographical path that Jesus would later follow ... but let's backtrack a bit.

Like Jesus, John's birth was somewhat dramatic in itself. John's parents Elizabeth and Zacharias had failed to bear children. [5] Luke tells us that Elizabeth was barren and they were both well advanced in years. Children were seen as the blessing of God, the hope for the future. In a state with no welfare system, parents, in their old age, relied on the children to care for them. I wonder how well that would go down today? No children meant the prospect of a very uncomfortable, even destitute old age. Zacharias was a priest. While serving the incense altar in the Temple an angel of the Lord appeared terrifying him. He was told he would have a son and to name him John. Zacharias was sceptical, he wasn't a young man about to be fooled by anyone. For some people the challenges and disappointments of life weaken their faith in God's divine power. Zacharias wasn't going to be let down again or pacified by platitudes from anyone about the greatest pain in his life. Addressing the angel, he asks, ***“How do I know this is true? We're both too old.”*** Well, in one of the greatest, 'you talk too much' putdowns the angel strikes him mute until the baby is born. This divine intervention would have been something of a shock to Zacharias as you can imagine. Suddenly unable to speak, no matter how hard he tried, for months, the reality of his doubting God is made very clear, especially as Elizabeth's belly swells with the growing child. Nothing is impossible for God. We make a mistake when we limit God to the extent of our own imaginations. God can do far greater in answering prayer than we could ever imagine. When the child is born, Zacharias is able to speak and the first thing he does is to announce the child's name will be John as he was told to do. Funny that! He'd had time to think about it.

John's life is destined to have a specific purpose determined before his birth.[6] ***“He will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, ‘to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,’ and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to***

make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” (Luke 1:15-17). John will live what is almost the Nazarite vow abstaining from alcohol and the cutting of his hair for life. The third aspect of the Nazarite vow, having no contact with the dead, is not required of him. Symbolically significant for those who can read between the lines. John will call the people back to God, picking up where Malachi left us at the end of the Old Testament: turning the hearts of fathers to their children, exposing false wisdom and preparing the people for the coming of the Lord. John, almost uniquely, will be filled with the Holy Spirit from birth. Operating in the Spirit of Elijah, John prepares the people for the coming of the Messiah. In this there is a parallelism, Malachi (5:5) promised Elijah would return before the great and terrible day of the Lord, that is the Second Coming. John explicitly denied that he was Elijah returned (John 1:19-23) but he does operate in the Spirit of Elijah. This word then is given to Zacharias before either John or Jesus were born.

Some children complain about their parents wanting them to follow a prescribed path through life. Some parents want to vicariously through their children. But John’s role is far beyond this. John is sent by God for a particular task; to prepare the way for His Son. From an early age, understood to be around five or six years of age John leaves to live in the desert areas somewhere to the south in the region of the Dead Sea or thereabouts. [7] A desert place but populated by various Jewish ascetic individuals and their followers. The desert was seen as a place of purifying and religious devotion. Not far away at Qumran, beside the Dead Sea, was one of the two great settlements of the Jewish Essene sect that practiced extremely strict ascetic practices and scorned what they consider the abominations of the Temple. They existed until 63AD when they were exterminated by the Roman under Titus and Vespasian. Until he begins his ministry we hear nothing about John. Then suddenly his voice cries out from the wilderness and thousands upon thousands of people trek out to the desert to see and hear this come-lately prophet. His ministry moves from the south of the Jordan to various areas of Samaria and back. So effective is he that the Sanhedrin considers him a threat and forms a commission to investigate him. So many disciples begin to follow John that for centuries his disciples are to be found spread around the world. Paul encounters some in Acts 19 in what is today Turkey. There are still groups of Jews who see themselves as direct descendants of Baptist disciples and continue John’s teachings.

We know the encounter of Jesus and John at the Jordan when Jesus is baptised. In John 1:29 [8] we are told that John recognises Jesus immediately when he sees Jesus coming towards him. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. It is quite likely he has never met Jesus, other than when both he and Jesus were in their mothers’ wombs. Jesus left for Egypt immediately after birth and John likely to the desert before Jesus returned. But the power of the Spirit moved him in recognition of the Saviour. John sees that Holy Spirit descend and stay upon Jesus and hears the voice of God confirming who Jesus is. The next day when two of his disciples are with him John shows Jesus to them and they immediately begin to follow Jesus. This is likely to have been James and John. John wasn’t raising disciples for himself but to follow the Messiah and now the Messiah was here. When Jesus requested that John baptise him John was flabbergasted. He was here

to point to the Saviour. Why would the Saviour need to be baptised? John felt he needed to be baptised by Jesus not the other way around. Jesus told him to allow it so that all righteousness might be fulfilled. In other words, Jesus was being baptised to affirm the call to righteousness and identification with the Kingdom of God not for his sin. Jesus did what He wants us to do. If we are to walk in His footsteps then we do what Jesus did, not what we feel like.

Thereafter we have one of the more telling incidents of John's life. John and his disciples departed and continued their ministry, calling people to repentance and to be ready for Jesus. But John's ministry also had political overtones. Amongst the sin he called out was the sin of King Herod. [9] Herod had committed a significant sin in the Jewish world. Herod had divorced his wife Phasaelis, daughter of King Aretas of Nabataea. Then he had taken his brother Philip's wife, Herodias, and married her. This was an outrage amongst the pious Jews and a scandal to the rest. John called him out for it repeatedly to Herod's great shame and embarrassment. Herod had John imprisoned in [10] Machaerus, the military compound and summer house he had built at the Dead Sea. In one of the great ironies of history the dungeon where John was placed was deep in the mountain, beneath the fortress, beside the water well. John continued his preaching which echoed even more loudly up the well and all over the mountainside and fortress. Herodias fumed and wanted John killed, obviously an active participant in the scandal. Herod however recognised John as a holy man and did not want his blood on his hands, he was also aware that thousands followed John or saw him as a prophet and that to kill him could spark civil unrest. So, John sat, bound in chains, preaching in the near darkness day after day unaware, most of the time, of the impact of his words.

In all of our lives we have times when we wonder why things are happening the way they are, why God doesn't seem to be listening to us, or why life just seems unfair. John must have been feeling that way. But then John wasn't privy to the wider plan of God any more than we are at times. When Jesus heard that John had been imprisoned He began His public ministry (Matt 4:12-17). Hearing of the initial words of Jesus, John sent some of his disciples to Jesus to ask, [11] ***“Are you the Coming One or do we look for another?”*** (Matt 11:3). Why would John ask such a thing, why was he having doubts about Jesus? The simple answer is that as a man of his culture in the Roman oppressed Israel, John looked with a passion to the day that the Messiah would come with fire, John's favourite term. Malachi had said that the Messiah would return suddenly to the Temple (Mal 2:17-3:1). Isaiah (35:4-5) had promised the Lord would come with vengeance. This is what John was looking to Jesus to bring about. But it wasn't happening. How often do we expect something of God and then see that His plan is different to what we expect? That's the walk of faith. To know that we are not in control, that we cannot tell God what to do, but that what God is doing will ultimately work for good. As Paul will later state in Romans (8:28-29) [12] ***“And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.... to be conformed to the image of His Son”*** and that in the meantime (in Romans 12:1) we to present ourselves as living sacrifices which is holy and

acceptable service and in verse 2, to not be conformed to this world but to be renewed by the transforming of our minds.

John's mind needed transforming, his desires had skewed a Godly focus. He like many others had missed the first stage of the Messiah's coming, to be the suffering servant who would die for the sins of the world. The first stages of this would be the miracles Jesus would do that would demonstrate His authority in the physical world and the spiritual world. Thus, Jesus sends John word, [13] ***"The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me."*** John's mind was set at rest. He needed to re-think what he knew of God's Word and purposes. To realise that God's plan was far greater than he had imagined. Yes, Jesus was the Coming One, the miracles fulfilling Scripture attested to it. That was all John needed to be at peace in what would follow.

John dies, famously, his head brought on a platter to Herod at the request of Salome, Herodias' daughter. [14] Salome has become a synonym for lust. It was the lust of Herod that had got him into trouble in the first place and it, along with drunkenness, would again now. Wanting to see his wife's daughter dance and progressively undress for him, in what was reputedly the seductive dance of seven veils, Herod in his drunkenness promised up to half his kingdom if she would. Prompted by her mother Salome requested John's head in return. Mortified but too proud to refuse in front of the court, Herod granted her request, John was beheaded, his head brought on a plate to be presented to the court.

The Jewish historian [15] Flavius Josephus will also record of John that Herod killed him saying, *"lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into [John's] power an inclination to raise a rebellion, (for they seemed ready to do anything he should advise), [Herod] thought it best [to put] him to death."* When Herod was not long after the subject of a military disaster at the hands of Aretas, his father-in-law (Phasaelis' father), many Jews saw it as God's punishment for his unrighteous behaviour.

John then was the last of the old-school prophets. He was the forerunner of Jesus and he teaches us to continually be seeking the Lord's will for our lives and to reflect on what is happening in our situation so that we might see the hand of God at work. Like John we should never give up no matter how difficult things seem but rather seek the Lord and He will speak into our lives. The Lord is ever with us, aware of our situation and has purpose in all things. He knows us and loves us and as we keep faith in Him He opens our eyes to things we do not yet know or understand.

Even though we might not immediately see it, in God's Kingdom all things work for the good. As Proverbs 3:5-6 puts it: [16] ***"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths."***

Amen