

## JOHN THE BAPTIST – REV'D JOHN SPRING - 13 DECEMBER 2009

**Readings: Zeph. 3:14-20, A Song of Isaiah (APBA p 391), Phil 4: 4-7, Lk 3: 7-18**

*In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

When I was a teenager, my parish priest used to air a wish that parts of the bible had never been included in it. His favourite target in his Sunday night sermons was the Book of the Revelation, which, he said, was a happy hunting ground of heretics and sectarians of every kind, not to mention religious fruit loops and maniacs, and a cause of unnecessary confusion and anxiety for faithful Christians.

However, this priest's largest target was the Old Testament. For the most part, he would say, it was best left to the scholars to study. Ordinary Christians should focus their attention on the New Testament.

I never felt inclined to agree with him and today's gospel reading challenges the inclination of some Christians to ignore the Old Testament. It does so by drawing to our attention a man who, if he was anything, was the **bridge** and the **point of fusion** between the worlds of the Old Testament and the New. This man, a fire-breathing, real Old-Testament-style prophet, straight out of the desert, turns up in the New Testament.

Here, he opens the door for Jesus and lays the foundation for Jesus' messianic campaign. When Jesus launched his mission, it was after this man was arrested and imprisoned, and he actually began by taking up this man's famous slogan – "Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand". Furthermore, most if not all of the leading disciples of Jesus began as disciples of this man, who then left him to follow Jesus.

This man, then, in his relationship to Jesus, and Jesus' to him, makes it clear that there is an unbroken continuum between the Old Testament and the New, that the Old paves the way for the New, and the New cannot be understood without reference to the Old.

We are speaking, of course, about John the Baptist, or John the Baptiser as some say.

How important was John? Jesus said that, amongst those born of women, **no-one greater** than John had arisen (Matthew 11.11 and Luke 7.28). This makes John, by Jesus' own testimony greater than the giants of the Old Testament: greater than Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, greater than Moses and Joshua, greater than Elijah and Elisha, greater than Isaiah and Jeremiah, and greater than David, Solomon and Judas Maccabeus.

With this kind of endorsement, we can hardly think of John as a curious relic of the Old Testament who, accidentally, turns up in the gospels. On the contrary, he is the key to the gospels. He is, you might say, not only the *herald of the Messiah* but the *midwife of the New Covenant*. Without John, and without the Old Testament which he embodies, Jesus could not have mounted his campaign and the New Covenant would have been stillborn.

Yet this does not mean the New Testament is simply an *extension* of the Old, or that Jesus is a *continuation* of John – an Elisha to John's Elijah. It is also John who reveals to us that the Old Covenant was passing away, and the New was coming into force. It is John who famously says to the crowds who came to him to be washed clean of their sins,

*“I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”*

The gospel writers use John’s witness to testify to Jesus as the Messiah and they are at pains to show that there was a shift in the way the good news was preached and received. For example, Jesus did not maintain his use of John’s slogan, his stark demand for repentance.

Neither did he pursue John’s way of starkly confronting the political powers that be, and of speaking directly to rulers and soldiers. Instead, Jesus developed his own, much more subtle, more insidious, but no less powerful way of getting under the skin of the corrupt, the arrogant and the dishonest. While, like John, he could confront people in power and sometimes did, he addressed himself more often to the people, and he also used healing and teaching, and the influence of a life of exemplary obedience and faith, to win their hearts and minds. As we are often told, the authorities could not move against him *“for fear of the people”* who loved him

Jesus also superseded John. He asserted that he had more to say, and more authority to say it, than did John. He said,

*“I have a testimony greater than John’s.” (John 5.36)*

Furthermore, Jesus said that, however great John was, greater than any other human being, the least person in the kingdom of God was greater than was John in his time, before the kingdom came.

So John shows us both the *relevance* of the Old Testament and the *superiority* of the New.

Of course, the world has long enjoyed making fun of John and characterizing Christians as people who go around snapping *“Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand”* at people having fun. And not a few Christians have wanted to distance themselves from John, and say that our religion is not at all like that. Rather than defend John, they disown him. And in doing so, they disown the many ways in which Jesus was like John, an apocalyptic figure warning of judgement.

Yet, while Jesus superseded John, and the New Covenant superseded the Old, John is not to be discounted as a relic of the Old Testament, any more than the Old Testament is to be discounted as a product of an ancient religious culture no longer relevant to us. Jesus did not come to render the Old Testament, with its heavy emphasis upon works of the law, obsolete and irrelevant. Rather, the Old is taken up into the New.

*“Not one jot or tittle of the law shall pass away,”* says Jesus. And again he says, *“I have come to fulfil the law and not to destroy it”*.

The part of the bible we call the New Testament in fact begins with John the Baptist, and so we are called, by the gospel writers, to heed his teaching, his warnings and his example **as part of the good news**. Today, Luke tells us that John delivered his message without compromise – his warnings, his denunciations of hypocrisy, sin and complacency, and his moral teaching—and that he also proclaimed the coming of the Messiah as judge, saying,

*“ . . . one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 **His winnowing-***

*fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”*

But, says Luke, this was (and is) not bad news. It was (and is) **good news**.

“So,” [says Luke, ] “with many other exhortations, [John] proclaimed *the good news to the people.*”

And why did the people receive it as **good news**? They did so because the reassertion of a moral and spiritual order in the world *is* good news. Telling people justice and truth will prevail is good news.

The alternative to moral order and judgement is not moral comfortableness and inclusiveness, but moral chaos and the tyranny of personality. When evildoers thrive and the vulnerable suffer without redress, when powerful people and ruthless people can do what they please and the weak have to swallow their dignity and suffer in silence, that is hell on earth. And when justice and truth are not a principle but something some charismatic personality can bestow upon us for a time, we have no firm ground but only the sand of political personalities to stand on.

So the revelation of a moral order is good news, and when we do wrong, it is **good news** to know that God does not look the other way and pretend we didn't do it. Like any good and responsible parent, God sets boundaries for us and takes action to teach us right from wrong, good from bad. The Buddhists may call it karma, the impersonal law of cause and effect. As Christians, we know it to be God's **personal involvement and influence** in the lives of us, his children, and of all humankind.

It is in John the Baptist, then, that we discern the Old becoming the New, and in him we also see a fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah, that there would be

*‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:  
“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”*

And why so? Because this, as painful as it may be, is **good news** for, when the moral order of the Kingdom of God is asserted,

*5Every valley shall be filled,  
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,  
and the crooked shall be made straight,  
and the rough ways made smooth;  
6and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.*

Yet John's prophetic role, as harbinger of the Kingdom of God, coming in judgement, is part of what the Messiah is and does. John is indeed a dimension of Jesus as Messiah too, and you and I, as the Church militant, the Body of Christ on earth, are called to manifest all the dimensions of the messiahship of Jesus including this one.

We manifest his teaching, his healing, his restoring and his reconciling, his prayer and his purity, his goodness and love. Yet we are also commanded to **stand up, like him, and like John before him, against arrogance and complacency and dishonesty, against falsehood, bullying and cynical selfishness**. We too are to be voices crying *in* the wilderness, and to cry out *from* the wilderness into the streets and lanes, the living rooms and the schoolrooms, the

churches and church halls, of every city, town and village and say, ***“Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight.”***

And why? Because if the paths are not straight, if we allow ourselves to be comfortable with leaving them a bit crooked, Jesus Christ, returning as judge, will straighten the paths as he comes. He will not walk crookedly to accommodate our sinfulness. He never did the last time; he certainly won't this time. He will straighten his path as he comes, and that could be very painful for those who are content to leave them crooked.

With these things in mind, then, let us pray together the collect for today (APBA Collect for Advent 3, Year C):

***“Almighty God, you sent your Son into a world  
where the wheat must be winnowed from the chaff  
and evil clings even to what is good:  
let the fire of your Spirit purge us of all corruption,  
so that, purified, we may wait eagerly for him  
whose coming is certain, whose Day draws near,  
your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,  
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, for ever and ever. Amen.”***

John Spring