

SURVIVING JOHN THE BAPTIST

SERMON St James King Street Sydney, 8 December 2019, Advent 2

TEXTS: Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72: 1-7, 18-21; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

Come next Holy Week, at the end of the grand story of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, we will discover yet again that we do not get the Christ without Judas, that quintessential reminder of humankind's capacity for wrongdoing. Today, as the beginning of that grand story approaches—that is, the birth of Jesus we celebrate at Christmas—we discover yet again that we do not get Jesus without John the Baptist, that quintessential trader in non-compromise. Neither Judas nor John are characters any of us much wants to meet but, as in Holy Week we can't avoid meeting Judas, so, in Advent, we can't avoid meeting John the Baptist.

When our daughter was a teenager and bringing home young men, Bill and I had a private term for those we thought unsuitable. We'd say to each other: "Hi Mum, I'd like you to meet ..." John the Baptist is a "Hi Mum!" character. No way is he comfortable. John the Baptist is the one we'd cross the road to avoid meeting. John the Baptist is the weirdo from the cartoons, the one with the sandwich board or the placard proclaiming that the end of the world is nigh and we're all doomed! John the Baptist is wild-eyed, primitive, unkempt and sweaty in his smelly camel's hair clothes.¹ John the Baptist is the unwelcome embodiment of all that hellfire and brimstone preaching that has threatened, condemned, terrified and driven people from God ever since he and his bad breath burst into Christian teaching.

But meet him we must. For John the Baptist is God's messenger. He is the one, Matthew tells us, *of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke, the one crying out in the wilderness*. And what might that wilderness be? Might it be perhaps the barren

¹ Matthew 3:4

Godless place in our hearts? “*Prepare the way of the Lord,*” John thundered. “*Make his paths straight ... into that wilderness!*”² And John rages about cutting out dead wood, and separating wheat from chaff and casting dead wood and chaff along with all the rubbish into a never-ending fire. And we want to turn away, believing ourselves to be the good wood, the green living wood that bears succulent fruit, and the wheat, golden wheat, that is turned by fire into life-giving bread, sweet-smelling bread. Not rubbish! Not dead wood! Not chaff! “That’s not us!” we cry.

That is the judgment call we make! But John the Baptist stands in our way and rails at us, “It isn’t your call to make! The one who is to come will make that judgement call!”³ And when we hear the word ‘judgment’ we know the word that’s coming. Repentance, and that we don’t want to hear! Judgment demands repentance and repentance demands decision-making about who we are and how we live our lives. Which is all about challenge and cost and prices to be paid and things to be given up, and changes to be made. And that unsettles the *status quo*, in which our lives, our work and our beings are comfortably invested.

So most of us don’t flock to hear talk of repentance but *the people of Jerusalem and all Judea* did. And they confessed their sins, says Matthew, and were baptised by this wild man, despite his fiery and sulphurous presence.⁴ Why did they seek him out when we’d run in the other direction, hide behind the nearest rock, swim to the other side of the Jordan, anything to avoid his stern eye and wrathful challenging condemnation? How are these ancient people, the ones Matthew was addressing in his gospel, how are they different from us that they would seek out John’s preaching whereas we would prefer to stuff our ears? Was their world so different that they could hear where we cannot?

² Adapted from Matthew 3:3

³ Matthew 3:11-12

⁴ Matthew 3:5

Rampant materialism, excessive individualism, a who-gives-a-damn attitude to community; these are hallmarks of so much of our world, a world extensively flushed clean of God, of a sense of transcendence, of accountability, of humility. We live in a world that pretty much follows just one commandment: thou shalt not get caught'.⁵ Our ancient ancestors lived in a world where those same hallmarks and that bleak commandment were also familiar. A world where the powerful ruled and the powerless suffered just as they do today. Which means there are similarities as well as differences between Matthew's world and ours. He places John's angry preaching in the tension in his community between the new gospel of the Christ, with its call to repentance and renewal, and the world of the *status quo*, of the synagogue where the Pharisees and the Sadducees rejected the gospel and turned away from The Baptist's angry rebukes and threats about God's wrath over such rejection. Hence John's bitter name-calling.

"*You brood of vipers!*" he shouted.⁶ "You presume to think you're safe from God's judgment, your ancestry from Abraham justification for your ways, protection from judgment! Why are you even here? You think you can play with God? You can't hide your hearts from God! You can't just say the right words and beat your breasts a bit and cast your eyes to God in heaven and think your guilt is gone and your consciences clean. It's all or nothing! Repent and turn back to God or the holy one of God who is coming will see you for what you are, and judge you condemned for your hypocrisy. You claim Abraham and his faith your protection? From the God who could take a handful of dust and create a human being? Who could take one of these stones at your feet and do the same!" John's are fighting words! And I wouldn't be surprised if he'd picked up a handful of stones and pelted the proud Pharisees and Sadducees and driven them away to smart over the sting of his words and his stones and wonder uneasily whether this wild man from the desert spoke more of God's truth than they.

⁵ Brueggemann *et al*, *Texts for Preaching, Year A*, p.17

⁶ Matthew 3:7

We are invited by Matthew's story, and by John the Baptist's preaching, to wonder the same thing. Maybe there was much about his world that was godless, and maybe there is much about our world that is the same, but nothing and no one is completely flushed clean of God. So there is more to this story than John the Baptist's bad breath; there is also the sweet fragrance of Advent hope. There is that shoot coming from the stump of Jesse, of which Isaiah speaks, the shoot upon which rests the spirit of wisdom and understanding, of counsel and might, knowledge and awe before the greatness of a merciful God.⁷ This is not about self-conscious piety, as the Pharisees and Sadducees found when John the Baptist challenged them. John's challenge is about the possibility of newness, a new world in which *righteousness [will] flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more*, as the psalmist put it so lyrically.⁸ It's about a form of new being and living that breaks through the destructive, old, death-dealing patterns of life with which we are comfortable, to create something genuine and just.

John's challenge is about being daring enough to strive for God's different world whose hallmarks are equity and justice, not greed and selfishness. It's daring because we don't know what that world would really be like. It's costly because most of us are pretty content with things exactly as they are. So Matthew's story about the Baptist both warns us of the cost of genuinely transforming ourselves to be the people God created us to be, and invites us to take the risk anyway. To accept the dare!⁹

There are no guarantees. We children of God are pretty flawed and difficult creatures and we will, as like as not, make our usual mess of things. But we are not left to accept the dare and risk our lives alone for there is that sweet fragrance of Advent hope. It will carry us through the next weeks of wondering about God's truth, and the truth about ourselves, to the day when Advent hope will be made real in the birth of a

⁷ Isaiah 11:1-3

⁸ Psalm 72:7

⁹ Based on Brueggemann *et al*, *Texts for Preaching, Year A*, p.10

child—Emmanuel, God-with-us. Then the grand story of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ will begin again with the extraordinary fact that God takes the extraordinary risk of living or dying at our hands.

You see, it's not just about us. It never is just about us. It's about God who risks God's own life—for us. To be vulnerable for us. When that Christmas dawns will we be able to face the risk to us of nurturing that life, of nurturing God? Of loving God? It's a crucial question for these coming weeks. God's life depends on our answers for God's life depends on our love.

(The Rev'd) Elaine Farmer, Second Sunday of Advent, 8 December 2019