

Third Sunday of Advent  
17-12-2023  
St Cuthbert's Anglican Church – Tweed Heads

Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11      The year of the Lord's favour  
The Spirit of the Lord is upon me

Psalm 126  
or Song of Mary              The Lord does great things - He restores exiles  
My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord

1 Thessalonians 5: 12-28      Final Instructions  
Do good – Love each other

John 1: 6-8, 19-28      John the Baptist declares his mission.

### Introduction

Today I'd like to look at John the Baptist and how the example of his life might be relevant for us. I'd like us to look at how John's life might help us in our faith journey, as we continue in our Advent preparations for the coming of the Christ child.

Let's begin by having a look at John. There's no getting around it. Even for his time John the Baptist was a strange and unique character. He wore odd clothes, he ate strange food and he preached an unusual message of repentance, from out in the desert.

But I don't think he did all this just for the sake of being different. Who he was, and what he did, he did out of obedience to God. Our Gospel reading this morning begins with these words:-

There was a man who was sent by God.

So, John the Baptist, in his desert preparations, in his call to repentance and in his bold proclamation of the coming Messiah, was doing his best to obey God's will for his life.

Today I'd like to look at two aspects of John's life.

Firstly, his preparation in the desert.  
And secondly, his ministry and actions.

In doing this I'd like to look at how these aspects of John's life might impact our own lives.

## Preparation

Let's begin by looking at the preparation John had for his ministry. To do this properly I think we need to go back to the Old Testament.

It is from the prophet Isaiah that we have the words spoken by and about John:-

A voice of one calling, "In the desert prepare the way for the Lord! Make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God."

And in the writings of the prophet Malachi we hear these words:-

"See I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes."

So, we know from both of these Old Testament prophecies that Israel expected someone to proclaim that the Messiah (Jesus) was coming and to prepare his way. John's preparation had begun before he was even born.

And then we hear in Luke's gospel John leapt for joy in his mother's womb, when Jesus' mother Mary came to visit. We also hear that because of this visit John's mother Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

Then the Gospels don't really tell us much about John's life between his birth and his ministry. In Luke's gospel we have only this statement:-

"And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel."

We know that Jesus began his public ministry around the age of Thirty. So, John the Baptist, who began his ministry just prior to Jesus would have also been about thirty years old at the beginning of his ministry. In my reckoning from childhood to thirty is a long time to spend in the desert. So, what do we see in all of this preparation of John the Baptist. We see God at work, even when it might appear not much is happening. For John there was a long time in the desert before his ministry came to fruition.

We might also experience this in our lives. Sometimes we also have desert experiences. Times when not much seems to happen. Sometimes this is just preparing us for the mountain top experiences which are to follow. And we can see cycles similar to this in nature. In nature, we see in the seasons, times of slowing down and times of speeding up. We only have to look at how much the grass has needed to be mowed over the last few weeks compared to rarely thinking about it over winter, to have this confirmed for us. We see in nature this ebb and flow of life.

John the Baptist's time of preparation in the desert reminds us that we need times of slowing down in our lives, time for reflection and preparation, and it seems to me that the spiritual observance of both Advent and Lent are ideal opportunities to build this time of reflection into our lives.

## Ministry and Action

And now let's look at the other side of John's life. His ministry and action. We are not all called to be exact replicas of John by wearing clothes made out of camel's hair and eating only honey and locusts, but we are all called to follow Jesus, each in our own way. What I'd like to look at is how we might take inspiration from John's life in living out our own.

I'd like to look at 3 points:-

Firstly, John's call to repentance, secondly, his honesty, and finally his commitment.

## Repentance

The message John preached was a message of repentance. Although it's a part of our liturgy, this is a part of our Christian faith that is sometimes glossed over especially by those who live in our very nominally Christian society. I recall when Prince Charles was married to Camilla, In the TV commentary Kerriann Kenerly was making a big deal about the fact that Prince Charles was going to "Repent of his sins". It was obvious to me that either she or the person who scripted what she had to say, had little to no idea of Christianity. We cannot accept Jesus as our Lord and Saviour unless we first repent of our sins. It is only by turning away from sin and selfishness that we can turn towards Jesus.

## Honesty

John was blatantly honest with people. When they asked him if he was the Messiah, he told them straight away – No – but he let them know he was preparing the way for the coming Messiah. It was John's honesty that got him thrown into prison and eventually killed. John rebuked Herod the king for taking Herodias for his wife, because she was the wife of his brother Phillip.

Now there's something in me that doesn't like confrontation. I like to get on with people. Sometimes this means that I'm not entirely honest with people. In trying to be nice I sometimes hold back the truth of what I think or feel, and this isn't necessarily good. Sometimes being nice can be dishonest, and we need to guard against that. Sometimes being honest will cost us, like it did John the Baptist. Now in saying this, I'm not advocating verbal abuse of those we may not get on with, but rather sometimes it will be hard, but we need to find the best ways to be honest with those around us.

## Commitment

John was totally committed to serving God. Sometimes people equate working in full time ministry with being totally committed to serving God. This is not correct, and I find this kind of thinking really sad. To be committed

means to accept Jesus and to be in tune with the plans he has for our lives. Whatever these plans might be. We say as we greet each other we are the Body of Christ. To use Paul's analogy a body has many parts, and each of them are required for the body to function properly. So, commitment is not about the particular job you have, but how you commit what you do to God. In Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, we heard this morning Paul gives a long list of final instructions.

The list is quite long and includes respecting leaders, living in peace, warning the idle, encouraging the timid, helping the weak, being patient, resisting revenge, being joyful, praying continually, giving thanks, not putting out the spirit's fire, not treating prophecies with contempt, testing and holding onto good, avoiding evil, and counting on God's constant help.

These are types of things which show our commitment, not necessarily the particular job we do.

### Conclusion

I'd like to sum up this morning with the prayer of Serenity.  
It goes like this:-

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,  
The courage to change the things I can,  
And the wisdom to know the difference.

God appointed John the Baptist for his role!  
And John carried it out.  
What did God appoint you to do?  
And how are you carrying it out?

Amen.