

## John 1:6-8

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. <sup>7</sup> He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. <sup>8</sup> He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

## John 1:19-28

Now this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders<sup>[a]</sup> in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. <sup>20</sup> He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Messiah."

<sup>21</sup> They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not."

"Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No."

<sup>22</sup> Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

<sup>23</sup> John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"<sup>[b]</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Now the Pharisees who had been sent <sup>25</sup> questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

<sup>26</sup> "I baptize with<sup>[c]</sup> water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. <sup>27</sup> He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."

<sup>28</sup> This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

## John the Baptist

John is one of those characters whom the New Testament and the church hold to be very significant, and I have sometimes wondered why. After all, if Jesus had come without John's heralding, would he not still share God's love and grace through word and action, just as well? And yet, Micah announces clearly that Elijah will return before the Messiah to prepare the way, and then here he comes, *preaching* stern words of winnowing and repentance, but *performing* baptism — the enactment of God's grace. He's an enigma, and every third Sunday of Advent I keep finding myself puzzled by John the Enigma.

John is the last of the Old Testament prophets in many ways — a throwback to Isaiah and Jeremiah in their stern warnings, and to Ezekiel and Daniel in the hope he brings, and that sense of being a 'performance-artist' prophet — a man who spoke with his actions as well as his words.

Now, I've been reading Tom Wright, the theologian, and he points out that Judaism understood itself through the lenses of Torah, temple, land, family and battle. We'd be here a very long time if I went into this in any detail, but the gist of his argument is that Jesus reshaped the understanding of all of this, and that Paul articulated all this change in his letters. But what about John the Baptist? He clearly anticipates at least the first two of these aspects.

Let's begin with Torah — keeping the law. The pharisees movement formed between the Testaments. We all know they were fixated on keeping the law exactly, and also that Jesus critiqued them for encouraging a legalism that missed the heart need for goodness. This was the wrong path — John showed them the right one. Repent, and be baptised.

Repentance was not a thing pharisees necessarily engaged in (certainly judging by what Paul says of himself before his conversion) — such a person was normally confident that their practice of keeping kosher, keeping the festivals and saying their prayers kept them firmly 'in

God's club'. Repentance probably seemed as strange to them as it does to many now — necessary for wicked sinners, but not for me! Yet this is what John called for, and many responded to — a recognition that however hard we try, and as worthy as we are, nonetheless we still miss the mark. Within this call for repentance is the recognition that keeping the law does not make you *good*. *Goodness* requires a change of heart — which, it turns out is far more important than observance of minor laws. Indeed, repentance was the heart of keeping the law, not legalistic minutiae. John's preaching communicated this.

But once people had come to repentance, they needed to be right with God, to know that the Lord understood and forgave them. What could they do? Present a sacrifice at the Temple in Jerusalem? The poor could not afford even this, let alone those who lived far from Jerusalem. Was God's grace available only to the rich?

No. John baptised in the Jordan, symbolically washing away the sins, assuring the penitent of their forgiveness. This practice circumvented the temple. The priests and traditionalists must have been furious. John's baptism suggested a far wider vision of God's grace than the temple could accomplish.

I think too, that John's baptism indicated a shifting of ideas, from justification by keeping the law to 'only by grace'. There was grace implicit in the call the repentance and grace in the baptism.

These two facets of John — repentance and baptism — really implied a lot of the transformation that Jesus would bring. In the light of Christ it become clear that the law was a set of guidelines founded on the principles of love, and that the temple had only ever been a pointer to Jesus.

- Where did heaven touch earth? The temple? No, in Jesus!
- Where could you find atonement for your sins? The temple? No, in Jesus!
- Where did God reside on earth? The temple? No, in Jesus!

But that wasn't the end of the change. Jesus had only a few years walking the earth. But he was succeeded by the Holy Spirit, given to all who believe. Now it is not Jesus, but *you* who are the place where heaven touches earth, where God resides on earth, even where God's grace dwells.

How can John come as a herald for us today? As we anticipate Christmas, and also Christ's return, perhaps we need to be reminded that it is so easy to do what the law and social pressure suggests, but find that it has become an act, and that our hearts were occasionally far from our deeds. To be reminded that what the world needs is not obedient citizens so much as *good* people, loving people, who seek God, and know God's heart, and don't mind repenting if that draws them into knowing the extraordinary love of God, made known through Jesus Christ.

Amen. SDG.

***You are invited to our Christmas Day Family Celebration 10am***

***Everyone is very welcome***

