

John the Baptist

A talk given as a prelude to an Ecumenical Advent Study group

Scriptural Foundations

John the Baptist is, without any doubt, a major religious figure who first appears near the beginning of each of the four gospels. A cousin of Jesus, John is for all intents and purposes an Old Testament prophet. His strong imagery, the prophetic critique of injustice and the manner in which he calls people to transform their lives all stand in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets. This is no coincidence.

The very last prophet in the Old Testament, Malachi, finishes with these words:

“Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.”

Now in Luke’s gospel these words are recorded:

“Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With *the spirit and power of Elijah* he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

John the Baptist, in John’s gospel, certainly doesn’t consider himself to be Elijah:

“This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, ‘I am not the Messiah.’ And they asked him, ‘What then? Are you Elijah?’ He said, ‘I am not.’ ‘Are you the prophet?’ He answered, ‘No.’ Then they said to him, ‘Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?’ He said,

‘I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,
“Make straight the way of the Lord” ’,
as the prophet Isaiah said.”

Finally there are the words of Jesus in Matthew’s gospel:

“And the disciples asked him, ‘Why, then, do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?’ He replied, ‘Elijah is indeed coming and will restore all things; but I tell you

that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but they did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man is about to suffer at their hands.' Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them about John the Baptist."

This is how we are to understand John the Baptist. He is the last of the prophets in the Old Testament tradition. He's the bridge between Malachi and Jesus. And with John, the line of Old Testament prophets comes to an end.

John and Jesus

It's no coincidence that he's baptising people by the river Jordan. The symbolism is massive. It was through the Jordan that the people of Israel entered the Promised Land, ending their journey through the wilderness. Now, by the Jordan, John is preparing Israel to end its journey through the spiritual wilderness to enter into the promised visitation by God. Looking back from our time we see this visitation obviously in Jesus, but in John's eyes all he has is the inkling that one is coming soon and that he must lay the groundwork, preaching against evil and injustice and cleansing as many people as possible through baptism, in preparation.

In this ministry he stands outside the established religious hierarchy, outside regular Israelite society. He preaches a stinging message of social and religious critique calling people back into a true relationship with God. He's popular. He doesn't hold back and like any true prophet, he runs afoul of the religious and civil authorities, by calling them to account for their words and their actions which run contrary to the righteousness expected of them. What John cannot know is that he is part of the beginning of the extraordinary revolutionary movement where humanity encounters the divine.

There is something striking in this man, John. It's not simply his wild appearance. It's not simply his explosive preaching. For all his potential to grasp at power, he is exceedingly humble. In Acts, Paul quotes him, "What do you suppose I am? I am not he. No, but one is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of the sandals on his feet (Acts 13.25b)." Here is the great prophet, who denies any greatness, and points to the truly great one, Jesus. This astounding humility, like his preaching, is shockingly counter-cultural: and it is this humility that leads him to say to Jesus, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

Such was John's ministry that some of his own disciples followed Jesus as recorded in John's gospel:

"... John testified, 'I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.'

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!' The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus."

John's Death

John was exceedingly fearless and particularly popular. It was this fearlessness and popularity that eventually led to him to be imprisoned by Herod Antipas. This was for John's denouncement of Herod's adulterous and incestuous marriage with Herodias, wife of his half-brother Philip. He was beheaded at the request of Salome, daughter of Herodias, who asked for his head at the rather wily and cunning instigation of her mother.

Now, for us...

We hear these words from Luke's Gospel:

"He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.

Every 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;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." '

And the crowds asked him, 'What then should we do?' In reply he said to them, 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.' Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.' Soldiers also asked him, 'And we, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.'"

Fearless witness, arresting imagery, and stirring preaching, it's all great and wonderful stuff! Yes! We say to ourselves, there's so much in the world that needs straightening out! There's famine, disaster, corruption, injustice, war, terrorism, tyranny and all sorts of bitterness. All around us there are people we know of who are unhappy, or unemployed or unloved or all three. We want God to come back and sort it all out and if we're conscious of it, we start to pray that it may be so. This is big picture stuff about the whole world being put to rights but when it comes to us, the answer to our question about what we might be able to do is this: "Straighten your lives out in the simplest, most direct way, if God is to come and take up residence."