

John the Baptist

15 7 12

Almighty God

by whose providence your servant John the Baptist

was wonderfully born

and sent to prepare the way for your Son our Saviour

by the preaching of repentance:

lead us to repent according to his preaching

and, after his example,

constantly to speak the truth, boldly to rebuke vice,

and patiently to suffer for truth's sake;

Our text is taken from today's gospel from Mark chapter 6 and verse 16:

'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.'

June 24th, Midsummer's Day, marks the day that John the Baptist was born, six months before his cousin, Jesus. His beheading, on the orders of Herod Antipas, we mark on 29th August. So John the Baptist has two special days allocated to him in the Christian calendar but there are other days, like today, when his name pops up in the gospel for the day.

Today's gospel is a curious one. John is dead but his cousin, Jesus is very much alive. And the grapevine being what it is, news about Jesus quickly spreads throughout the land and many people ask the question who exactly Jesus is or

who he might really be. And oddly enough some actually think Jesus is his cousin John returned from the dead. And suffering from a guilty conscience, that is precisely what Herod thinks and this thought, his thought is our text today: **'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.'**

And our text is the cue for a flashback. In the next 12 verses, Mark succinctly summarises John's arrest by Herod for daring to criticise his marriage to his brother Philip's wife, Herodias. We learn of the tension in the court and the pressure to have John executed but Herod's reluctance to do so. Our attention then turns to a birthday banquet at which his wife's daughter, Salome, dances before the king and his guests and so captivates and delights them that Herod foolishly promises her anything, up to half his kingdom. Her mother tells her to ask for the head of John the Baptist and it is delivered to the girl on a plate while John's body is removed for burial by his disciples. A great story but a sad end for a man who was not afraid to speak the truth.

John was probably the last of the Old Testament prophets and his job, as he saw it, was to prepare the people for the coming of the Messiah. It was his predestined role even before his birth. Even before he was born, baby John had kicked his mother in her womb when he heard the Virgin Mary's voice, newly pregnant with her son, Jesus.

John must have been an uncomfortable man to be with because he was not afraid to tell the truth however much it challenged or upset his audience. Unlike Salome, John did not aim to please or to get what he wanted by pleasing people. Rather

he wanted to shock and to shame them into repentance, challenging them to get their act together in order to prepare the way for the coming of their king.

But this morning, I want to leave you with just this one thought about John – not what he did or what he said but what he was called. You'll remember that when the angel first appeared to his father, Zechariah, when the old priest was burning incense before the altar, he doubted that his wife Elizabeth who was thought to be barren could bear them a son in their old age. For his reasonable doubt, Zechariah was struck dumb. He was still dumb eight days after their boy's birth when at his circumcision Sarah told the mohel what the boy was to be called – John. Given how very conservative their society was that the time, to name the boy with a name other than that of his father or one of their family was scandalous – not at all the done thing. So Zechariah, being a man and the head of the family, was asked and calling for a tablet on which to write, he wrote **his name is John**. And immediately Zechariah could speak and he prophesied about the boy.

But as I said, let me leave you to reflect on John as a given name. It means either the love of God or the grace of God. Either is suitable since it emphasises that through John's witness, the love and grace of God would be brought to the people of God by pointing them to the coming Messiah, Jesus.

Poor Herod got it completely wrong. Jesus was not John back from the dead – it was much more shocking than that – he was God's son, the Messiah, very much

alive in the world and someone who would overturn their world by dying on the cross.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

15th July, 2012

H: Sermon 26 : John the Baptist

