

## John the baptiser

10 12 17

O Lord, raise up, we pray, your power  
and come among us,  
and with great might succour us:  
that whereas, through our sins and wickedness,  
we are grievously hindered  
in running the race set before us,  
your bountiful grace and mercy  
may speedily help and deliver us.

Our text may be found in today's gospel from St Mark chapter 1, the first three words of verse 4: 'John the baptiser'

Today, the Second Sunday in Advent, our attention shifts to Jesus' cousin, John, the son of Elizabeth and Zechariah. Now, I do like our pew Bibles, the NRSV, the New Revised Standard Version, the latest and best translation of the scriptures of its time and the kind gift to our church by the Revd Simon Barnes who was then the Vice President of the American Bible Society. But I have to say that I bridle at the rendering of John the Baptist as John the baptiser. Okay, I can understand that John is not a Baptist in the congregational sense of the word but it just seems a bit sad that the name by which I've known John for most of my life should be changed in so minor albeit accurate a way.

But, for me, the word that best sums up who John is and what John is is 'forerunner'. At John's circumcision, his father, the priest Zechariah, predicts in the words of the Benedictus (Luke 1v 76) that John 'will go before the Lord to prepare his way'. And this is precisely what John is doing in fulfilment of the prophecy of the prophet Isaiah that Mark quotes at the beginning of our gospel today:

'See I am sending my messenger ahead of you  
 who will prepare your way  
 the voice of one crying in the wilderness:  
 "Prepare the way of the Lord  
 make his paths straight."

John is not in Jerusalem but he is living outside in the countryside, in the wilderness and there, to any who have ears to hear, he speaks. And his message is essentially two-fold. Firstly, he calls on people to repent and be baptised and secondly, he points to the one who is to come after him, their long-expected Messiah.

Baptism in the river Jordan is essentially a form of Jewish ritual cleansing. It's a mikvah, a ritual bath where the river water washes away the sins of the people. Judaism is all about purity. By what they do and by what they eat, Jews keep themselves pure. Sin, wrong-doing, is graphically depicted as getting dirty, and to be cleansed of your sin, you are literally or symbolically washing away the filth that defiles you. As such, John's baptism in the river Jordan is more likely to have been by total immersion rather than a simple sprinkling. In practice, baptism was a public acknowledgement of our falling short of the standards that God sets for

us and an expression of our desire openly and unreservedly to say sorry to him and to be reconciled to him by getting rid of that which makes us impure.

And, in the act of baptism, John is also pointing to Jesus. Folk at the time wonder whether John is their Messiah but he categorically denies the possibility pointing instead to the one who is to come, one whose sandals he, John, is unworthy even to unfasten. No, the real Messiah will not baptise with water but with the Holy Spirit. And that encapsulates our Christian notion of baptism where we are anointed not only by holy water and holy oil but by the presence of the Holy Spirit in the act of being baptised.

If last week, on Advent Sunday, we looked forward to the Second Coming, this week, on the Second Sunday in Advent, we are looking at John the Baptist looking forward to the coming ministry of the Messiah, a ministry that, around the age of thirty, Jesus began after first having been baptised by John in the Jordan, then tempted by Satan in the Wilderness.

Advent, then, is clearly about looking forward so let me end this morning by asking the question what is it ultimately we each look forward to? To me, it is the possibility that, when I die, I will hear the words of ultimate approval - **‘Well done good and faithful servant’** (Mat 25 v21).

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

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G: Sermons 37 :John the Baptist

