

Advent III, 2023

John the Baptist

The third Sunday of Advent is John the Baptist Sunday, the day we remember the great forerunner, the one Jesus said was the greatest ever born of women. The picture we get of him in John's Gospel, at least this bit of it, is of a fairly restrained character – one interested above all in pointing away from himself, towards the one who is to come and whose sandal he is not worthy to undo. The impression left by the other Gospels is of a rather fiercer, wild character. Take Matthew's summary of his preaching:

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptised by him, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the tree; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.'

How would that kind of ferocity go down here, do you think – to the great crowds that will come here in a week's time for Christmas? I suspect he would be the kind of guest preacher who did not get invited back twice. His message can, not unfairly, be summed up thus: 'Turn, or burn'. He was not really a lovely Christmas kind of preacher : he belongs out there in the rocky wilderness, with scorching heat and howling wind rather than in the village church with sweet organs and choirs.

John is a wilderness man, and he's in the wilderness for a reason – precisely because he rejected the way his society, first century Israel was organised, and above all he rejected the settled, confident and privileged order of Temple priesthood and ruling class working comfortably within the Roman Empire. John looks at all of this with contempt. *You brood of vipers*. As far as he is concerned, the Establishment is rotten to the core, and like a rotten tree it is not long for this world. *Even now, the axe is laid at the root of the tree*. John waited in the wilderness for what he was sure was coming – the day when God would finally clear out the mess: the day when the whole rotten establishment edifice would come crashing down in a fire of divine fury, divine justice. People, we're told, wondered whether he himself might be the one to start this fire, whether he might be the promised Messiah, but he said No: 'I baptise you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming: I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

It's odd then, that we go on remembering John this morning in this lovely old building, in the Established Church, in gentle, peaceful Hertfordshire, in this most comfortable of services. It doesn't get much more settled than this, and John was not a settled man. What would he make of being co-opted into our kind of religion? He would find it to say the least, *odd*. And we shouldn't rush too quickly to assuming that it actually does make sense – we need to at least be alive to the possibility that our religion and social order is under judgement, just as first century Jerusalem was in John's eyes. Not everything respectable and ordered and comfortable is Godly – and John's preaching stands as a constant reminder of that.

That said, it's important to remember that whilst John was someone who saw things right, a true prophet, he was also someone who got things wrong. John thought that One mightier than he would come, and that the fire would begin – that the rotten establishment, the whole corrupt system, would come crashing down, would be torn down by the Messiah. Well, the One mightier than John did come – John saw the beginnings of Jesus' ministry, saw (the Gospels tell us) the Spirit descend like a dove on Jesus and mark him out as the Coming One, the Mighty One, the Messiah. And yet, what John thought would happen, didn't. Jesus did not bring the world crashing down in fury. He did not slay the wicked – the tax collectors, the rulers, the corrupt: he talked with them, he ate with them, he loved them. He looked for them to change, yes, but he would not destroy them, he would not even force them. 'Turn, or burn' was John's threat. 'Turn, because you are loved', was Jesus' invitation.

No wonder, then, that before long John was doubting what he had seen, doubting whether this could really be the one he had waited for. 'Are you he who is to come, or are we to wait for another'? - that's what John desperately wants to know as he lies in his prison cell, wondering why the justice he longed for is delayed. And Jesus tells John's messengers: go tell John what you hear and see – the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.

It is a wonderful and joyful and profoundly important answer. John longs for justice, and for him justice means, primarily, the wicked getting what they deserve – God smashing the arrogant. Jesus brings justice, and for him justice means, primarily, people being set free, relationships being set right. John's is a vision of punishment; Jesus' is one of healing. It comes to a head on the Cross, when evil is most rampant and arrogant, when the temptation to crush and punish it must have been strongest. And what does Jesus do? He tells Peter to put away his sword. He says that if he wanted, he could summon twelve legions of angels to do all the fighting necessary – but that he will not. And right as the nails are driven into his hands, right as wickedness reaches its climax, rather than curse and swear revenge, he prays 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.'

One mightier than I is coming, and I am not worthy to undo the thong of his sandals. That one came, and he was mightier in a way stranger than John had begun to imagine. His was the mightiness of peacefulness. Peacefulness. Not apathy, not complacency, but peacefulness: a life wholly without violence, without hating, without despising. Without all these things, and radiating instead hope, gladness and joy into the lives of others. A life is lived which will not crush anyone, in any way – which loves even those who hate it and hate themselves. When the New Testament speaks of Might, of God Almighty, that is what it means: that Jesus' peacefulness is the deepest, truest, most powerful reality of all. That in the long run, there is no wickedness, no hardness of heart, no despair so great, that it cannot be touched and healed and turned round by that peacefulness.

That is a message which it can sometimes be hard to hear. Like John the Baptist, we can want God simply to crush the wicked – it is easier, swifter, less mysterious. It is always easier for us to hate. But God is not like us – and he hates nothing that he has made. In Advent we celebrate his coming not to punish and kill, but to start the long, slow, deeply mysterious labour of loving us – each one of us – back to life. Like John the Baptist, may we learn to accept that strange truth with joy.