

Sermon 24 June 2018 John the Baptist

Luke 1:23-29

Today we look at the person of John the Baptist, a fascinating and very important figure. But first, a few words on our gospel reading.

John's mother, Elizabeth, was a cousin of Mary. It was during the early stages of Mary's pregnancy that she visited Elizabeth, heavily pregnant with John. Elizabeth told Mary that she was blessed by God and that her baby was also blessed. *Luke 1:39-42*. She then broke into what is known as Mary's Song of Praise, which inspired the Magnificat, which in turn formed the basis of the wonderful hymn, Tell out my Soul.

So John was related to Jesus, and was about six months older. In Palestine, the birth of a boy was an occasion of great joy. When the time of the birth was near at hand, friends and local musicians gathered near the house. When the birth was announced and it was a boy, the musicians broke into song. If it was a girl, the musicians went silently away! To say it was a man's world in those days would be an understatement.

In Palestine names given to babies related to something to do with the baby concerned. Elizabeth and her husband, Zechariah, who was a priest, named the baby, John. John is a shorter form of the name Jehohanan, which means 'God's gift'. It must be remembered that Elizabeth, and especially her husband, Zechariah, were advanced in years.

John's ministry took place in the desert, which in itself is interesting, because it was well-removed from the Temple. He preached repentance and forgiveness through baptism, rather than the traditional path through making sacrifices at the Temple. For this reason, he was off-side with the religious leaders. People came to him in great numbers and he baptized them in the Jordan River.

John preached about the coming of someone far greater than himself, who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. *Luke 3:15-16*. John was preparing the way for Jesus. And of course, one day Jesus did arrive. He came to John and asked him to baptize him, which John did. Jesus then disappeared into the desert for forty days where he prepared himself for his ministry.

So John played a crucial role in laying down the groundwork for the ministry of Jesus. He established a code of conduct which Jesus then built on. *Luke 3:10-13*. Throughout his ministry Jesus constantly challenged the old guard, the establishment as manifested in the Pharisees. John's ministry began that transition from the old age to the new. For Jesus, John the Baptist was the greatest prophet. *Luke 7:28*.

What can we learn from John? Well, for starters he was a person of impeccable integrity. He had a vivid sense of what was right and what was wrong, and he was more than prepared to make a stand accordingly. Unfortunately, this did eventually bring about his demise. King Herod had married his sister-in-law and John publicly spoke out against him for this. Herod's wife, Herodias, was furious and prevailed upon Herod to have John arrested and put in jail. But Herod actually had a good deal of admiration for John and would often visit him in jail and talk with him. This made Herodias even more hostile towards John, and she soon was able to get her revenge.

Herod was hosting a banquet in the palace. Herodias had a daughter who performed a dance for Herod. Herod, having had a couple of wines, got a little carried away and at the conclusion of her dance, announced that she could have whatever she asked for. After consulting her mother, the daughter said, 'I would like the head of John the Baptist.' Poor old Herod was in a quandary. He really liked John but he couldn't back down in front of all the guests, so he reluctantly sent his soldiers to cut off John's head, which was brought to the daughter on salver and she in turn presented it to her mother.

Please don't let that story put you off standing up for what you know is right. It does take courage and might not always be popular, but it is the right thing to do. I am not sure if I told you the story of when Kruschev, leader of the Soviet Union 1955 to 1964, pronounced his famous denunciation of Stalin in the Congress Hall, someone is reported to have called out, 'Where were you, Comrade

Kruschev, when all these innocent people were being slaughtered?’

Kruschev paused, looked around the hall, and said, ‘Would the man who said that kindly stand up?’ Tension mounted in the hall. No one moved. Then Kruschev said, ‘Well, whoever you are, you have your answer now. I was in exactly the same position then as you are now.’

He knew it was wrong not to make a stand. He knew he didn’t have the courage at the time. Like John, it might well have led to his demise but let’s remember this, it is always the person who has the moral courage to make a stand that earns the respect of others, not the perpetrators.

Speaking of integrity, I want to finish by referring to an article in Thursday’s Herald. The article was headed, ‘Losing Faith. Why fewer Kiwis are going to church.’ It made for sobering reading, and raised some very good points which I think we need to think about, but that is for another time. However, I want to refer to one point made, a point that ties in with what we are talking about this morning. One of the main issues that negatively influence perceptions of Christians and their religion is hypocrisy – Christians not practising what they preach. We have talked about this before, how it is by what we do that we will be judged, not by what we say.

Let me finish with a true story. Some years ago, members of a Los Angeles church visited a beach for a day to enjoy some sun, sand and swimming, as well as a barbecue. I am not sure whether they were in the sun for too long but this church group face up to \$50,000 in fines for illegally taking at least 14,000 marine snails, and then lying to the police about the theft. A person with a valid fishing licence can take thirty-five of these particular snails, a shell-fish delicacy. A call to the police tipped off officers that the church members were collecting snails by the bucketful. When police investigated, four church members told police all the snails had been returned to the ocean. Further investigation uncovered two hundred pounds of snails in an ice chest.

If we want to draw people to our faith, to our church, the most effective way of doing that is by our deeds, not our words.

Reverend Warner Wilder