

## Sermon 10 December 2023 John the Baptist

### Romans 15:4-9 Mark 1:1-8

Mark's Gospel begins with the words we heard from Isaiah about a voice crying out in the wilderness: *'God said, "Look, I am sending my messenger before you, and he will prepare your way. He is a voice shouting in the wilderness: 'Prepare a pathway for the Lord's coming!'"* According to Mark, this was a prophecy about John the Baptist.

John the Baptist was a fascinating figure. He was a cousin of Jesus. He lived in the wilderness and preached forgiveness through baptism rather than making temple sacrifices, which was the way you were supposed to go about it and was the way promoted by the religious leaders. Apart from any religious reasons, it was also a great money earner for the Temple. So, as you can imagine, John was not very popular with the religious authorities. Shades of Jesus to come!

John baptised people in the River Jordan, urging them to turn away from sin, and at the same time, he prepared people for the coming of Jesus, telling them that Jesus would be baptising with the Holy Spirit. In other words, God would be working through him.

Then, of course, the time came when John baptised Jesus and the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove came and rested upon him and God's voice was heard proclaiming him as his Son.

John was undoubtedly a man of great faith. You wouldn't banish yourself to a life in the extremely harsh conditions of the desert if you didn't have great faith. And look at the forceful language he used at times. He called the Pharisees and the Sadducees, *'You brood of snakes!'* Matthew 3:7. I think that shows that he was very sure of the ground he stood on. This is a man of fire and with a strong sense of purpose.

But here's the interesting thing and the point I want to focus on for a minute – John had his moments of doubt. There came a point in time when John questioned everything he had been proclaiming so forcefully and with such conviction. It comes a little later. John has been imprisoned by Herod and he is feeling a little low, understandably. He hears about all the amazing things Jesus been doing and yet he sends messengers to Jesus to ask him, *'Are you really the Messiah we've been waiting for, or should we keep looking for someone else?'* Matthew 11:3.

This is really quite staggering. Earlier on we see him devoting his life to preparing the way for the coming of the Messiah and then baptising Jesus as the Messiah, and now he is having second thoughts. Now he is having doubts. How human is that! I am quite sure this is something every one of us can relate to.

What I want to say is this – it is quite ok to have moments of doubt. For goodness sake, if John the Baptist can experience a moment of doubt, I think we can be permitted to experience the same.

Invariably, these moments of doubt arise at a time when we are experiencing some form of hardship. In John the Baptist's case, his moment of doubt arose when he was in prison. Being in prison at any time is not the best of experiences (I am assuming!). In those days, it would have been particularly harsh. His spirits would have been down and life would have felt rather bleak. And so he is assailed by doubts.

It is when life is not going our way that our faith can become a little vulnerable. That is quite natural. Even Jesus was not exempt. *'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'* he cries out from the cross. Throughout his life we see moments of his humanness. This is undoubtedly one of those. So don't be at all

surprised if you have moments of doubt, of feeling vulnerable and a little uncertain in terms of your relationship with God.

There is no doubt that when there are times when we experience something going astray in our lives, it becomes difficult to maintain an unshakeable faith in God. How often do we hear the cry from someone in that sort of situation, 'Where was God when this happened?'

There is the story of a distraught woman who cried to her priest, 'Where was God when my son died?' The priest answered softly, 'The same place as when his Son died.' God does feel our pain, he does hear our cry. It is understandable to question God's existence when things turn to custard in our lives, but if we can still put ourselves in his hands, despite the pain or the frustration, we will in the end feel his presence. Interestingly, his presence will invariably be manifested through the love and support of those around us. That's how God works – through the love of people.

I want to come back to John the Baptist. As well as proclaiming the imminent arrival of the Messiah, he urged people to turn away from their sinful ways. This, of course, was all part and parcel of preparing for this advent. *'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!'* he said. In the same way, we need to make sure our lives are in order, are in harmony with what we profess to believe.

There is a remarkable story that took place in the early days of British history. At that time, punishment for crimes was often cruel and unusual. A man was caught stealing sheep. The authorities ordered the letters ST, standing for 'sheep thief', to be branded on his forehead. The man spent the rest of his life trying to live down those words. He succeeded beautifully.

When he reached old age, the letters ST could still be seen on his forehead. When children asked their parents what the letters stood for, their parents replied reverently, 'They stand for the word *saint*.'

A few weeks ago, I made the point that we can all be saints. We don't have to be a Mother Teresa or a Francis of Assisi; all we have to do is to live in harmony with one another and with God. I quote from our first reading in which Paul says, *'May God, who gives you this patience and encouragement, help you live in complete harmony with each other – each with the attitude of Christ Jesus toward the other.'*

Strictly speaking, we should be acknowledging Advent all year-round. In other words, be constantly preparing ourselves for an intimate and face-to-face experience of Christ. Christmas is a festive occasion, and that's great. The last thing I want to be is a party-pooper, but it is important that we don't lose sight of the real significance of this festive season; that we don't lose focus on the goal, on the purpose of cementing our relationship with God.

George McDougall, Methodist missionary, said this: *'Best of all, Christmas means a spirit of love, a time when the love of God and the love of our fellow men should prevail over all hatred and bitterness, a time when our thoughts and deeds and the spirit of our lives manifest the presence of God.'* I emphasise those last few words – *'manifest the presence of God.'* That really is what this is all about.

And let us remember this – we experience the presence of God through what we do for others. So, the last word goes to Mother Teresa: *'At this Christmas when Christ comes, will He find a warm heart? Mark the season of Advent by loving and serving others with God's own love and concern.'*