



24 June 2017

**Feast of the Birth of John the Baptist (John 1: 19-30)**

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Thank you, Richard, for preparing the way for tonight's theme with your beautiful rendering of that haunting opening recitative from Handel's *Messiah*: 'Comfort ye, comfort ye my people... The voice of one crying in the wilderness, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord"'.

Let us imagine we are hearing these words for the first time. We might then be asking: 'Who is that voice crying in the wilderness?' Of course, we know it refers to John the Baptist. All four gospels tell us that. But who is John the Baptist? Who was he then? Who is he for us tonight as we reflect on his story on this, the feast day of his birth? These are questions that are suggested by tonight's reading.

No doubt John the Baptist's activities had come to the attention of the religious authorities and so they have sent messengers to check out who he is. When they ask, 'Who are you?' John begins by telling them he is not the Messiah, nor is he Elijah nor the prophet. (There is wisdom in his answer. Sometimes we need to learn who we are not, before we know who we are.) Finally, when pressed, he says:

*I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness,  
'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said.*

Knowing that answer would not satisfy his masters, they then ask him why he was baptising if he was not the Messiah, nor Elijah nor the prophet, he answers:

*I baptise with water. Among you stands one you do not know, the one who is coming after me. I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.*

It's as if he were telling them: 'Look I am not the one you are looking for. I am here to introduce him because you evidently don't know who he is.' Ambition and competitiveness are not part of John's *modus operandi*. He is an exemplar of one of Richard

Rohr's great one-liners: 'This isn't about you.' It seems to me that John the Baptist really knew his place in the drama – he was not the main act but the lead up. So later when his disciples – who seemingly were more competitive – report on Jesus' growing number of followers, he tells them: 'He must increase and I must decrease.'

John may have been humble about his role in the drama, but he is no pushover – no reed shaken by the wind, nor polished courtier, as Jesus pointed out. The tone of consolation and appeal evident in Handel's opening recitative is not so obvious in the way this messenger is presented in the gospels overall. When he emerges from the wilderness, neither his appearance nor his message seems particularly reassuring. But then again John's contemporaries were undoubtedly more familiar than we are with a tradition of strange itinerant preachers or prophets coming in from the desert, dressed in camel's hair garments and surviving on a diet of locusts and wild honey. (Any resemblance to Elijah is intentional!)

At any rate the people flocked to hear his confronting message of repentance and to submit to his baptism. And he doesn't make it easy for them either. When they arrived, according to Matthew and Luke, he didn't hold back: 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance.' In other words, don't imagine you can get away with just going through the motions!

Luke is the only one to provide a backstory for John in terms of a pre-birth and birth narrative. Perhaps this is to establish his credentials as a prophet, and to remind us that God's call precedes birth. For example, the prophet Isaiah says, 'The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me.' (Isaiah 49:1). Jeremiah (1:4-5) says, 'Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you."'

This idea that God calls us even before we are born is not confined to prophets. It is reflected in Psalm 139, which is another of the lectionary readings for the Feast of John the Baptist. The psalmist says:

*For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb... My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.*

*Your eyes beheld my unborn substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed (vv. 13,15, 16)*

In John's case, God's call even precedes conception. His parents, Zachariah the priest, and his wife Elizabeth were 'getting on in years', as Zachariah hastened to tell the angel Gabriel, who had come to announce that he and Elizabeth were to have a son, who would be filled with the Holy Spirit and who would turn people back to God. His very conception was a miracle.

Luke also includes that delightful incident when Mary visits Elizabeth. We are told that when Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting the child leapt in her womb in recognition. Thirty odd years later when he emerged from the wilderness, he again recognised him – especially after seeing the dove descend upon him at the time of his baptism. 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world,' he told the messengers. (John 1:29).

Later, however, when he hears from prison of Jesus' growing reputation as a healer and teacher, he sends messengers to ask Jesus: 'Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?' (Luke 7: 20). There are so many layers to this question. Perhaps he is learning the cost of what it means to live the words, 'He must increase and I must decrease'. It is these 'human' suggestions of vulnerability that suggest something of the man behind the role.

The story of John's execution has been the theme of drama, opera, ballet and paintings. It has all the ingredients for box office appeal – sex, violence and intrigue. You will remember that John had been imprisoned by Herod because he had challenged the legitimacy of Herod's marriage to Herodias. But there are some nuancing details in this drama. Mark sees Herod as a reluctant executioner. He says that Herod liked to listen to John. Why would he enjoy listening to the one who accused him of being illegitimately married to Herodias, his brother's wife? Somehow this seems to be saying more about each of them. We also learn that Herod continued to be haunted by John. When he heard of Jesus' activities he thought that John had been raised from the dead.

As I grappled with what I needed to say, especially in terms of who John the Baptist might be for us today, I kept coming back to that haunting refrain:

*I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness,  
'Make straight the way of the Lord.*

Or, as we heard tonight 'Prepare ye the way of the Lord'. This is also the version used in *Godspell*.

John learned the song that was his to sing, the work that was his to do, in the wilderness – the archetypal place of formation and transformation, especially for prophets and leaders, in both Jewish scriptures and the New Testament. John, Jesus and Paul all spend time in the wilderness. In addition to his time of temptation in the wilderness, Jesus regularly withdrew to a lonely place to pray. The word translated ‘lonely place’ is the Greek word ‘eremos’, meaning wilderness or desert. Jesus regularly sought out this space for renewal and prayer.

Although we do not have the public profile or heroic stature that these prophets had, we are all called to prepare a way for the Lord and to find what is ours to do and be. And we too learn to do this by spending time in the wilderness. Whenever we choose to enter this liminal space through spiritual practices such as meditation/prayer, compassionate mindfulness, spiritual reading, retreat, pilgrimage, spending time in nature, seeing a spiritual director or any other practice where we take time out from business-as-usual to seek God or to reflect on what life is really about, we are preparing a way for the Lord. Does not the ‘Maranatha’ mantra mean ‘Come Lord’?

Often though, we are thrust into wilderness by some crisis or an experience of loss. There are times when our hopes and dreams - or our sense of how life should be - are shattered by some profound loss of something that we felt defined us. It may be a relationship, a job, our health. At other times, we find ourselves in that wilderness because there is some internal shift that unsettles us. By not trying to avoid the discomfort (pain) of this experience, by allowing it to address or teach us, we are again preparing a way for the Lord. And when we emerge from the wilderness, our lives will speak differently. We don’t just do this work for ourselves – or allow it to be done to us. As Richard Rohr reminds us: ‘We can only give away who we are. We can only offer to others what God has done in us’.

It seems that chosen or unchosen, wilderness experiences can help us find our voice. But we don’t need to sing alone. Indeed, it is a delusion to think we can. There is a world of difference, however, between joining others in an echo chamber of shared prejudice and joining a polyphony of voices where all are welcome, even if you are not singing the same melody line. But in times of uncertainty, such as today, when we seem to be poised on the brink of chaos and trust in political and religious institutions is so low, echo chambers and the assured promises of false prophets can be very compelling, as we have seen on both national and international stages. I am sure you can think of examples.

I think there is a link between being a prophet and being a contemplative. Contemplative practice is inclusive, leading us to seek God in all things, seeing all situations as occasions for hearing God's voice. Or to put it another way, seeking to see all things and all people as God sees them.

Certainly, we need prophetic voices in the public domain. Where are they to be found? That is for another occasion, but I invite you to think who would be on your list. Recently ABC Compass presented a series on modern prophets that included Tim Winton, contemporary Australian novelist. Years ago, Sr Veronica Brady wrote a book called *A Crucible of Prophets* (1981) discussing the impact of Australian literary figures on Australian spirituality.

But poets and novelists do not proclaim. At least good ones don't. As the 19<sup>th</sup> C. American poet, Emily Dickinson said:

*Tell all the truth but tell it slant  
Success in Circuit lies.*

Or as Teresa of Avila put it in the 16<sup>th</sup> C., 'Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary use words.' She seems to be saying: Let your life speak.'

I would like to conclude with an excerpt from another poet, the Australian James McAuley. These lines somehow bring together some of what I have been trying to say in this reflection.

Incarnate Word, in whom all nature lives,  
cast flame upon the earth: raise up contemplatives  
among us, those who walk within the fire  
of ceaseless prayer, impetuous desire.  
Set pools of silence in this thirsty land.

A few lines on he reminds us of the link between contemplation and action – that we all need to incarnate words, to walk the talk, as it were:

Prayer has an influence we cannot mark,  
it works unseen like radium in the dark.

And next to prayer, the outward works of grace:  
humility that takes the lower place,  
serene content that does not ask for more,  
and simple joy, the treasure of the poor  
and active charity that knocks on every door.  
It's easy said – I wish my words might chime  
with fitting deeds as easily as they rhyme.  
Yet somehow between prayer and common sense,  
hearts may be touched, and lives have influence.

(From 'Letter to John Dryden')