

OT Reading : Isaiah 40 v1-11 - [Key verse Is 40v3 (A voice cries .. prepare a way for the Lord)

NT Reading : Luke 1 v5-20. – [Key verse 1v17 – He will go ahead of the Lord]

NT Reading: Matthew 14v1-12 [Death of John the Baptist]

John the Baptist is Dead. It took a while for Jesus to hear these words, as he was always on the move, but the words found him eventually by the shore of Galilee.

When he heard what had happened to John, he needed to get away from everyone, and find a place of solitude where he could grieve and spend time with his Father. So he withdrew by boat, moved to another part of the lake and found a lonely remote place. (Mt 14 v13). John the Baptist was Dead, and Jesus wanted this space to come to terms with what had happened. Why had some-one so young, Godly and talented died?

Up until John's arrest, it had been all about John. John knew this, he said that he had to become less so that Jesus could become more, but surely he didn't have to die to become less? In every way John had preceded Jesus, gone before him, now he had gone before him in death.

His Birth

The Christmas story does not start with the birth of a baby in Bethlehem, or even in Nazareth with Mary's angelic visitation. No – it starts in the capital of Jerusalem, in the temple, where an elderly priest from the nearby hill country had commuted in to do one of his 2 non-consecutive weeks a year of priestly duties. His Abijah division of priests was one of 24 sectors that took it in turn on a rotation basis. There were hundreds of them on duty in the week, and they drew lots for the privileged jobs, one of which was go inside the temple and burn incense on the Altar of Incense in the Holy Place. A great honor, that he may have done just once or twice in his lifetime. He would go into this priest-only zone and put incense on the heated incense altar and then prostrate himself in prayer. The incense represented the prayers of the people. Outside, the people were reciting this prayer during the incense offering: "May the merciful God enter the Holy Place and accept with favor the offering of his people.

The priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were both Levites, descended from priests. Both had lived long godly lives. They had been unable to have children and Elizabeth was now far too old. They were probably in their sixties. It was shaping up to be a normal day in the temple, but this was the day that the story begins, when God suddenly breaks through. [It kicked off a series of supernatural interventions which is still going today, but up to that day that had been no exciting from God for hundreds of years.] A frightening angelic messenger named Gabriel appears to Zechariah. Calms him down then says that he and Elizabeth will have this son who he must call John. From his very birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He must not have any wine or strong drink. He will be a great man in the Lord's sight. He will bring the people back to God. He will bring fathers and children together again. He will turn the disobedient back to righteous thinking. He will be like in the power and strength of Elijah, but more than that, he will go ahead of the Lord, He will pave the way for the Messiah. Wow! [Luke 1 v 13-17]

But Zechariah focussed on what was impossible in human terms, instead of looking on God's promises, and believing in God to do what he says. So he comes up with doubts and complaints – blah blah blah my wife's too old blah blah. He must have been arguing for a while, because those outside were wondering why he had been so long. Then Gabriel had had enough and struck him dumb for his unbelief. Saying that he could have his speech back when all the things he had said had come true.

When the baby is born, Zechariah is still mute. When a week old at the circumcision and naming ceremony, in front of a big crowd, Zechariah took a tablet to write on, and he wrote 'His name is John'. As he wrote John, his voice came back and he started praising God. Now that's drama; that's theatre. The news

of this spread throughout Judea. They said ‘What is this child going to become, for the Lords power is upon him?’ - There was a great weight of expectation on John. As he grew up he was. [Luke 1 v66].

In contrast Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem was witnessed by just a few, and despite the angelic choirs and visitation of Wise Men, Jesus spent the start of his live exiled in Egypt. Mary pondered these things in her heart, but for others these beginning were hidden. When they returned to Nazareth, the neighbours would have known nothing of the wonder of Bethlehem. They would though have probably known that Joseph had not slept with Mary before she got pregnant. So whilst John grows up the miraculous son of two priestly families, Jesus grows up with disputed parentage. The focus was on John not Jesus. What would John become?

His Ministry

John grew up immersed in the Scriptures as did Jesus, but it was John that broke out onto the scene first, and he was soon living up to the image of a Prophet. He moved to the desert region by the Jordan valley, and lived off what he could, locusts and wild honey. Of the priestly line, where his ancestors were bred large on the meat of sacrifices, he himself would have been an imposing figure. Large, hands like plates, wild and rough looking in his camel-hair tunic and leather belt. His popularity grew quickly, then went viral. The bible tells us that the **whole** of the Judean countryside and **all** the people of Jerusalem went out to him (Mark 1v5). Why did they go? To see miracles? No to confess their sins and to show they had started a new life, and they were baptised by John in the River Jordan. Incredible. That’s why we know he was such a great, popular and successful speaker. Thousands came to repent. He had the X-Factor and quickly became the superstar of the Jewish peasants and richer folk. Tax Collectors and Soldiers even came to him for advice on how to live within their current roles and not upset God [Luke 3v12-14].

The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. ¹⁶ John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. [Luke 3 v16]. [Still so true today].

Then Jesus did come to John. John recognised him as Messiah and baptised him and then Jesus went off into the wilderness for 40 days.

John says of Jesus “I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.’ The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. **That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less.**” [John 3v28-30]

Now John as seen and heard Jesus he says his joy is complete and he must become less so that Jesus can become greater. But why? Why didn’t Jesus take on board John the Baptist as his wing man? They had shared history, John had a proven ministry, charisma, and great oratory skills. What an amazing pair they would be, or would they? What if you were a very talented unknown singer and your friend Kate Middleton wanted to be a backing singer. How could you ever rise above her popularity, the future Queen of England, the media circus would always be focussed on your backing singer – she would have to become less for you to become more, and that’s just not going to happen.

His Arrest

John had fulfilled his prophecies – full of the Spirit, he had led the people back to God, and prepared the way for the Messiah. He had baptised Jesus, and his joy was complete. He then does something incredible, almost suicidal. He singles out one particular sin from one particular sinner –Herod Antipas (His King), who had divorced his wife (a Nabatean Princess) to marry the wife Herodias from one of his older brothers (Herod II

– another Philip). She brought with her a daughter Salome, who was later married to another of Herod's brothers, Philip the Tetrarch. Well calculated by Herodias as these were the only two sons of Herod the Great who were in power. She married one and then married her daughter to the other. She was a formidable enemy to have. The only voice against her was John the Baptist - she held a grudge, she hated him, and wanted him dead.

Herod sent soldiers to arrest him in the Jordan Valley and marched him in chains for several miles to his fortress palace, Machaerus, east of the Dead Sea. Machaerus was more than just a military outpost; the extensive renovations by Herod had turned the originally defensive centre into a lavish palace. Herod may have at first hated John, but once he had him in his cells, he became intrigued with him, and like visiting him and listening to him. He even gave his disciples access to him. Though Herodias may have nagged him, Herod would not kill him, because he feared this righteous and holy man.

Here was the first Jewish prophet for centuries revered by everyone, and Herod now had him to himself. Was this what John meant by becoming less, preaching just to Herod. Would he bring the King to repentance? Was this it? Had he done the right thing? Was Jesus really the Messiah? Had he thrown his life away for nothing? He just needed to be sure? He sent his disciples to find Jesus and ask him "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Imagine what John felt like when he heard those words, leprosy gone, blind people seeing, even dead people rising. It's sort of sad he had to ask but John needed that confirmation – perhaps he knew in his Spirit what was coming. Was this John trying to find the justification for his short life, about 31 years. Had he now fulfilled all his prophecies and was surplus to God's requirements? Was his time over?

His Death

Herodias was nursing this grudge against John and wanted him dead. But she was not able to, because Herod now feared John and protected him. Perhaps he also feared a backlash from the people. Finally the opportune time came for Herodias. On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. It was a lavish party with entertainment, great food and wine. Then an unexpected treat, his beautiful teenage step-daughter danced, and entranced him, flicking free her hair and whipping it, with her eyes fixed on Herod. She danced just for him, and his heart raced, he pushed up on the edge of his seat with his breath held as she danced her heart out for him and in the moment when the final note played and she fell prostrate before him, he leaps up and proclaims on oath that she can have anything up to half his kingdom. He is ecstatic, but when at her Mum's bidding, her request shocks Herod. "All I ask for is for the head of the one that taunts you, now please, on a silver platter. Look there is your Captain of the Guard, he can go now and bring me the head of the Baptist. The guests were shocked not at the request, but how distressed their King looked at this request.

I am reminded one of Les Dawson's awful mother-in-law jokes. Any mother-in-laws here? She says I need to lose 10lb of ugly fat, so Les responds – that's easy cut your head off! That's not what you want to hear from your son-in-laws. John said Jesus must become more and I must become less. But surely not that much less Lord.

What were the thoughts of John when his executioner came into his cell that night. Is that it God? Does it really end like this? How many other Christians since then have been in the same position as John. When Syrian militants called on Franciscan Priest Father Muran last June. He was told that he was guilty of collaborating with the govt and was taken to be executed where it was filmed outdoors. He was beheaded. This isn't how good Christian stories end is it- rough upbringing, find God, come through strong, but setbacks, then come back even stronger with a great ministry – not being beheaded in your 30s like John or your 40s like the Priest. Surely God my best years are still ahead of me. Does it have to end now.

Jesus described John as a Prophet and more than a prophet. He regarded him as the greatest person out there. "Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist".

John had the prophets role, paving the way for Christ, his job was not to be a pillar of the Church, that was for others.

Johns disciples took away his body and buried it. John the Baptist is dead.

Jesus later asked his disciples “Who do people say I am?”²⁸ They replied, “**Some say John the Baptist;** others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” When Herod heard of all the miracles Jesus did, he exclaimed “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!”. John had become as less as he could, but even now in death his name contended to take away from Jesus. I think he had to die, and I think both Jesus and John knew this. I think when Jesus heard that the great John the Baptist was dead, he knew that it had to happen for his sake, which is why he needed to escape, to grieve.

But the crowds found him, and came to that remote solitary place. As always Jesus is filled with compassion for them, and spends all day teaching them until all are hungry, and he feeds the thousands with 5 loaves & 2 fishes. That’s why they were in a remote place, it was the remote place he chose to grieve the death of John.

For the crowds that gathered they could say with confidence John the Baptist is Dead, but Jesus is alive. He paved the way for great miracles and other great works of the Spirit that started with Jesus, and has continued throughout every generation including today.

What it means for us:-

The Christian life on the front-line can feel like a game of Chess. You have to protect the King in Chess. In Christianity its all about pushing forwards the Kingdom of God. There’s strategy and casualties as even the Queen could be sacrificed to win the end game. Its not that God does not fully love us, but he has different purposes for each of us. Jesus loves us deeply, but he is under no obligation to make sense, to respect other demands on our lives or to take into account our expectations. John’s life provokes us to ask is it unreasonable to do things at great cost, and not to be able to assess if it was worthwhile or not? Even John needed some reassurance that Jesus was the Messiah? But are how far would we go for Jesus, if we can’t see or understand the value of what we are being asked to do.

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Jesus said “Truly I tell you, **among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. (Matthew 11v11). Jesus went on to say to his disciples and to us that we can do even greater things that he did. Really?**

Yes – but we need to make ourselves available.

We talk about the Incarnation at Christmas

God entered in word in the baby Jesus. But in another sense of the word Incarnation, God has drawn so near to Man, and drawn Man so near to himself, that they have become one. God draws close to you, you draw close to God, and you become one with your God.

We talk about Emmanuel at Christmas. Emmanuel – Means God with us.

God does simply use us by being alongside us giving us instructions – that would be great in itself. But God lives in us through the Spirit of Jesus. He is with us, because he lives in us. We are containers for Gods Spirit, so that we can bless others.

John was **available**, and God was **able**.

He made himself fully available to God to use. 24/7 in the Jordan desert he was available.

You be **available**, and God will be **able**.

Let Jesus draw you close to him, and you draw close to Jesus. Let his Spirit live in your life, and transform your life, so that you can take the good news, and take the Spirit and transform others.

God still blessed Zechariah despite him not believing Gods promises, it was just harder for him. But why do a Zechariah and make life harder for ourselves, when we could instead believe Gods promises on our lives, the great things we are capable of with his authority, and step into those promises.

John the Baptist is Dead.... But Jesus is alive, he's in live in you. This Christmas, this new year. Be filled with the Spirit, go where he takes you, whatever the risks, and help extend his kingdom, taking the good news to others. Step out, not with the restriction of human thinking like Zechariah, but knowing that all things are possible through God.