

Lk 3 – John the Baptist

There's only one mainstream denomination mentioned in the bible. And it's ours – because there existed a person called John the Baptist. Of course, being a Baptist in first century Israel was very different from being a Baptist in twenty first century London... Or was it!

In the early days of Baptists in Britain, there was an establishment, and it was a religious establishment. There was something called 'the church of England', into which you were baptised as a baby. Church and state were thoroughly intertwined; bishops had real power; church was not simply a Sunday obligation for a bizarre minority. It was the lifeblood of culture and politics.

So when Anabaptist showed up and started baptising people ana (the Greek word for 'again'), it was not simply a personal religious choice. It was an act of political defiance. It said that the baptism that brought you into the church of England as a baby was not valid; it therefore questioned the legitimacy not only of that church, but of the entire way that British government and politics operated. And it is hardly surprising that Baptists were persecuted as severely as they were.

But it wasn't any different from John the Baptist all those centuries earlier. First of all, John was baptising Jewish people in the river Jordan! There's only one type of person who needs baptising, and it is not a Jew. The Jews had had their communal baptism when they crossed the river Jordan to enter the promised land. By baptising adults in the river Jordan, John is saying that what it means to be part of Israel needs to be thoroughly redefined. And so his message warns that simply being Jewish means very little: do not say to yourselves, we have Abraham for our father. You could make children of Abraham out of these stones. But even before John has opened his mouth, baptising people in the river Jordan is an act of defiance because it claims that there is something seriously wrong with the current system.

In modern Britain, baptism is hardly regarded as political defiant. If anything – we live in a 'you do what feels right for you' culture, where baptism might sound a bit weird, but it's just a religious choice with no real consequences... although I have discovered this week, that if you work in the city police, if you move in the higher echelons of the Corporation of London, then you know jolly well about the Baptists worshipping at Bloomsbury. Your impression of Baptists is that they are out to cause trouble for the establishment.

Baptism is not simply an individualistic decision, a step in your own journey of religious self-discovery. When you are baptised, you enter into a new community – become part of the new Israel, entering into a new promised land. And as that community, you come to identify with others in such a way that you encounter God in them – in serving others you serve God, in receiving from others you are receiving from God. It is called being the body of Christ.

In our on going engagement with governmental authorities concerning homeless people, there is one recurring argument used against those who share my beliefs. Many of us at Bloomsbury simply believe that it is plain wrong to wake someone up in the middle of the night, simply to hose them down so that they will be pushed away from their habitat. The moral argument used against people like me is, 'if a member of your family were homeless, wouldn't you want to do all you could to get them off the streets.' As Baptists, as members of the new Israel and this Christian community, our response to this question is simply this. That it IS members of our family who are homeless, and who are subjected to these sleep

deprivation tactics, and it's doing more harm than good! It is members of this Christian community who are on the receiving end of the aggressive tactics currently employed by the Corporation of London.

Standing up for them is part of what it means to be baptised. Baptism is an event, but not some one-off religious event. To be baptised is to cross the river Jordan into the promised land, into the strange new world of God's blessing. Although in many ways it doesn't sound great. John seems to be something of a hell-fire and brimstone preacher – you vipers brood, who warned you to escape the coming retribution! (If he tried that in London, you can just hear the response: we didn't drag ourselves out of bed on a day off, dress up in our Sunday best and travel all the way here to be insulted! ...) What was John up to? How did such a negative message get so many followers and such influence?

The call is to prepare the way of the Lord, to make straight his paths – every valley shall be filled and the hills be made low. I went to a paper once with some of the top Biblical and theological scholars at Cambridge. And they had gone to great lengths to try to unpack what this meant. Hills brought low, valleys filled, preparing a way for the LORD. I suppose afterwards it seemed quite obvious! If you travel by road or train, any distance, you travel along routes where hills are brought low by having artificial valleys cut into them, and real valleys are filled by gorse ways. John the Baptist is paving the way for the Messiah himself.

And as a Baptist, the advice he gives is deeply pragmatic: if you have two shirts, give your spare one to someone without – and do the same with your food. If you're a tax collector – collect only what you should without taking unfair profits; If you're a soldier, no bullying, no blackmail – make do with your pay...

Well, this all well and good. But these are the kind of just actions that you might expect would be the fruit of the Messiah's ministry – rather than the preparation for that ministry. Let me say that in Christian ethics, the verses about sharing your shirt and your food, refraining from fraud and extortion, refusing to bully and blackmail, these verses are used indiscriminately – and their function in the text is forgotten. They are not the words of Jesus, they are the words of John, preparing a people for the Messiah. If the whole of Israel did what John says, there wouldn't be much need for a Messiah. If everyone was living the life of Justice, if justice reigned, what would be left for the Messiah to do?

So how precisely does achieving justice prepare us for the Messiah's coming? What is Jesus saying that John is not? The answer comes from the lips of John himself. There is one coming who is mightier than I. I am not fit so much to fasten his shoelaces. I baptise you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire!' The baptism of John is not baptism in the Holy Spirit.

But to speak of being baptised in the Holy Spirit opens up a whole range of concerns about charismatic Christianity, about bizarre manifestations of the Spirit's presence. But, to be baptised in the Holy Spirit we need only look to the next chapter of Luke. When Jesus is baptised, the Spirit rests upon him in bodily form – and the voice of God is heard from heaven, 'this is my Son with whom I am well pleased, listen to him.'

When Jesus was baptised, he was baptised in the Holy Spirit. He did not speak in strange languages, he did not bark like a dog, he was not slain in the Spirit. He received the word of

divine encouragement, those present were told to hear him, he was thrust into a time of testing, and then he was commissioned for his ministry!

To be baptised in the Spirit for the body of Christ, is surely something similar. We receive the word of divine encouragement, we are able to share the claim of Christ, “the spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us... to preach good news to the poor and so on.”

Being baptised in the Spirit doesn't simply mean that we try hard to be good, nor that we try to do all the right things. For John the Baptist, we might well try to do the right things – we might strive to achieve love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, self control – but Paul described those things not as commandments, but as the fruit of the Spirit. I believe it means that we become so filled with the Spirit that we cannot help but bear this fruit.

Striving not to please God, but to encounter him.

Striving not to do the right things, but to worship God with every ounce of our being.

Striving not to perform righteous acts, but to get to know God better.

That way, we might well find ourselves accidentally bearing the fruit that befits repentance, doing the things that John the Baptist would have us do. But those things are the fruit of our worship, not the root of our identity.

This is what we now celebrate in communion. We come in full acknowledgement of our weaknesses, our incapacity to change the world, or even to change ourselves. We come to God in weakness, and we encounter him in his weakness – and in so doing in his mighty power. This God who breaks bread with us, so shapes our being that it becomes almost impossible for us not to bear the fruits of the Spirit.

But what can we learn as we prepare now to encounter Christ in communion? How can we pave the way for Christ to come? I suppose the common thread in John's preaching is that of sitting lightly to the things which are likely to shape our potential allegiance to Christ. It is about having too much stuff! About allowing our comfort, our possessions shape our view of Christ. The most extreme example of this would be the Sadducees – who were the wealthiest landowners who had swimming pools, Italian sports cars and six figure salaries. And they did not believe in the resurrection.

You cannot, at the same time, be committed to obtaining stuff, money, possessions or whatever – and expect to encounter Christ. John alerts us to the way that our prior commitments are likely to determine the welcome we offer Christ. And as we come to share communion now – it is worth reflecting briefly upon what prior commitments we might have that may well shape the Christ we encounter here?

A love of travel, our love of fast cars, of designer labels.

Our political allegiances, our relational commitments,

Our hopes, our dreams, our vision our goal and our purpose.

If John the Baptist were here – I think he would fix his mad eyes upon us and question all the prior commitments that might shape our encounter with Christ.