

Mt 3:1-12

Those familiar with the Simpsons will know the name of Mr Burns. Monty Burns runs the power plant in a town called Springfield – and has a monopoly of control over the town. One day, he decides that he needs to appoint a democratically elected politician to protect his interests. And so Mr Burns says to his assistant: “We want a true leader. A natural leader. One who’ll do exactly as he’s told...”

It’s a great picture of people’s expectations from a leader. One who leads in precisely the way that we want them to lead. In Jesus’ day, everyone knew what they wanted from a leader. Everyone had their own agenda for what the Messiah should do, how he should behave, how he should lead. And so much of what happens in the gospels is taken up with the idea of Jesus shattering everyone’s expectations: and so much of what Jesus does, is to show his opponents that his ministry is what God has always been doing and reflects what God has always been like – even if he had defied everyone’s expectations about what a true Messiah is. This was a Messiah – who did not do exactly as he was told.

And John the Baptist bursts onto the pages of history to announce the coming of the Messiah – and like the Messiah that followed him, he was nothing like anyone expected. To begin with, he calls for a baptism! Now – what you’re saying – in calling the nation to baptism, is that the current habits of life and worship need to be put to death! Baptised – to make way for the Messiah. In calling people to repentance, he is already saying that this Messiah is nothing like the one people expect or long for.

And yet, somehow, there are hundreds of people flocking to this bizarre figure out in the wilderness. And the people who come to him, include both the tie-die wearing Green Peace activists, and the cigar-smoking members of a Gentleman’s Club on Park Lane. Or, in biblical terms: the Pharisees and the Sadducees. What kind of figure is going to appeal to both extremes?

Well, that’s not the most curious thing about this Baptist. The most bizarre thing he does, is to tar members of these two extremes with the same brush: calling them a viper’s brood! Now, however we want to interpret everything that follows – it’s pretty clear that John the Baptist is not very nice to them. How would we react to someone like this? Invite him back to our home? Or have a quiet word with our train driver to accompany him off the premises?

If John the Baptist were to come to Bloomsbury today, I can’t help thinking that there is one well known figure he would look like and sound like: I am talking, of course, about Eric Cantona! Eric Cantona is doing something similar today, to what John the Baptist was doing in Jesus’ day.

I spoke a few weeks ago about how in modern Britain, and in much of the modern west – the age of the political protest is passing. A million and a half people take to the streets to protest against war in Iraq – the government ignores them. And in fact, we can have no end of protest – and the government will register our discontent, and then continue with the policies to which we object.

And the more I think about it – the more I think that political protests belong to a bygone age when numbers of people on streets meant something. They belong to an age where you would invade another country, and expand the empire – by swarming it with actual, real

people! But this is no longer how empires function. The greatest lesson from world war two – was that a country is better conquered by means of economics! Setting up trade laws and economic laws, that channel all the resources out of a country – without a single soldier being sent in! Countries today, are invaded using the power of money! And when this is how the world works – taking to the streets, but continuing with the same old life style, is utterly ineffectual.

However, the French footballer turned actor-philosopher, has suggested an alternative. Looking at the injustice of the current banking system, and the ways in which poor people are being made to pay for the mistakes of the wealthy – he has likewise suggested that 3 million people protesting in the streets will be ineffectual. However – if those 3 million people, instead of travelling miles to political protest, just went to a local bank and withdrew loads of money – that banks and governments would sit up and take notice. That they would listen differently, he says!

Well, then the French politicians run onto the television and spout the same old predictable patronising, modernist clap-trap. That people should stick to what they are good at. That Eric Cantona was good at football, but should keep his nose out of economics! And this statement from politicians who claim to believe in democracy!

Then of course, the real economic experts are wheeled out to show how millions of people withdrawing their money from the bank would have no effect. Which is even more ridiculous – because when the banking crisis hit, everyone was warned not to do this: suggesting that actually, millions of people withdrawing their money would have a serious affect.

But what kind of effect? Well – if economics is a science – nobody knows, because there are so many variable and unpredictable and interconnected probabilities – that all we might be able to say, is that there would be chaos. Still – who knows... He calls people around the world to withdraw their money from the bank this coming Tuesday! That would be a protest that really means something!

What was interesting was the frightened and cynical reaction to Cantona that, for me, echoed in all kinds of ways, the reactions people had to John the Baptist!

The fact that the people came to him were all striving for a different world. And that when he calls for baptism – he is saying that their current way of striving for a better world is doomed to failure. Remembering, of course, that John the Baptist addressed people from opposite extremes of the political spectrum. His call for baptism – is akin to Cantona's call to abandon current ways of trying to change the world for the better. And to try something new.

Of course, it's slightly tongue in cheek. You can't make to tidy a comparison with a bizarre wilderness figure, and a winsome French multi-millionaire celebrity. But in trying to understand the impact that John the Baptist would be likely to have on us today – in Bloomsbury -I think Cantona at least gives us a window into hearing him.

He hit the Sadducees and the Pharisees: those who would defend the status quo, and those who would subvert it. Just as Cantona upset both the establishment who don't want millions of people causing chaos, and the radicals – who are used to protesting and who jolly well will carry on with protesting because it's what we do.

If John the Baptist is a herald, this is not the kind of herald we want – and the Messiah he promises is not the kind of Messiah we want. This is not a leader who will do exactly as he's told! But this is a leader with a following, who has an impact on the world!

And if the Messiah's herald is awkward, and disturbing, and undermines all that we value – how much more will the coming Messiah embody these annoying traits? Is this really the Christ that we want to encounter in worship? Is this really the Christ with whom we want to be in living, growing relationship? Is this really the Christ that we long for, whose coming into our lives we actively seek in the season of Advent?

Our celebration of communion shortly, expresses our desire to come to Christ. The bread and the wine speak of our readiness to invite him into our community – and into our lives. Here – in this meal – we claim to root our identity in this disturbing, undermining, rug-pulling Christ. Whether we are Pharisees or Sadducees, if our insecurities prevent us from encountering this kind of Christ: if we have no intention of this being a time when Christ touches us personally; if we are content to view this as an empty ritual, then – really, what are we doing?

It is that worship that forms the basis of an inclusive community – the kind that we read about in Isaiah. A community where the lion lies with the lamb: a community where leopards and goats, cows and bears belong together. A community of worship that embraces genuine diversity – as we see in Jesus day – with all the range of expectations about what the Messiah should do – about what Messianic leadership really was. Where the lions wanted to bring in the kingdom through violence, and the lambs would be passive in ushering in the kingdom of God. Pharisees and Sadducees would find themselves united in the worship of this coming Messiah.

And how did this look? How can this radical unity genuinely grip a community. I suppose, it is when the worship of this Christ eclipses everything else that is of worth. If we bring our own agendas to church, our own passions and concerns and expectations and worries – and build our church around them: we can forget about inclusivity, and our worship – however good it might be technically – will be a sham.

But if we come here with a desire, first and foremost, to engage with the Christ who invites us to this table, this is a Christ who destroys and rebuilds our own agendas and passions and concerns and expectations and worries. Any other Christ – is an idol. The Christ who simply confirms and strengthens us in all our assumptions and vanities and habits – has nothing holy about him at all. Singing to this Christ is a waste of time and breath and air waves.

The Christ who invites us to come to this table, is a radical: literally, one who engages with us in the very roots of our being. Not necessarily in some great one-off laser strike from the outer-heavens, though that may be how he works – but this is a Christ who will bring us as much trouble as comfort. This is a Christ who defies our expectations – a leader who does not do exactly what he's told.

But this is a Christ who, regardless of who we are, meets us – here and now: Who may offer us, even today, an alternative means of ushering in the justice promised in the Kingdom of God. Maybe even, a Christ who calls us to withdraw our money from the bank this Tuesday!

This is a leader who breaks some of the principle virtues of the modern age. In the name of welcoming the Lord's anointed, he models perhaps the least tolerant, least inclusive, least welcoming behaviour of the Gospels... People who have taken the bold step of coming to be baptised by him, are branded as cowards for fleeing some form of punishment, he calls them all snakes, and he tells them they are not real Jews. So not the most inclusive approach to ministry – or at least not the most tolerant. But we all know, don't we, that there is a huge difference between being inclusive and being tolerant.

I wonder which we are? Are we an inclusive church? Or merely a tolerant church? Of course, it is not up to us to answer that question. Not long after moving from Somerset to a little village in the fens, the nearby town of March was voted the least welcoming place in the country. For outsiders moving in, the Cambridgeshire town of March was supposed to be most unfriendly to outsiders and strangers.

And of course, the Media leapt on the town, and interviewed the inhabitants. And one of them summarised the situation perfectly: a woman who said more than she intended – “I don't think we're unfriendly. If people make the effort to speak to us, we'll speak to them.” Asking members of a community, whether or not they are an inclusive community – is pointless – because the community's self-perception will only be valid, if it really is an inclusive community! Inclusivity nowadays is a brand, a trendy virtue we like to think we model. It's rather like open-mindedness for individuals, the majority of closed-minded people genuinely believe they are open-minded.

In a community, it's always pretty difficult to say that we are this or we are that. Some people will experience the same community in a totally different way to others. And while it's unwise for any community to declare its own character to the world – when individuals do that – it seems to suggest a lack of emotional intelligence (unless you're filling in a job application!)

But there are questions we can ask ourselves about whether we are genuinely inclusive – or whether we are merely tolerant. An inclusive community is one that is willing to have its own character, its own reason for being, its own most treasured habits – challenged by welcoming the outsider. A tolerant community, is one that is happy to welcome diverse people from all manner of backgrounds – in the knowledge that we are right, and they must conform with our current, superior and better informed ways of being.

A tolerant community, will tolerate all manner of people as part of the church service – in the safety of the church building – where you can keep yourself at a safe distance from those who disturb you. An inclusive community, will exercise hospitality to the point of inviting people back to their homes or deeper into their lives – not only like-minded people, but people who have the potential to be more disturbing. Do we welcome the stranger only into our church life, and not into our social life?

A tolerant community will welcome people into decision making bodies, but has unwitting patterns of behaviour in place to prevent the awkward person being heard. We see this in recent governments' public consultations: where people are invited to feel that their voices have been heard, even if those voices are ignored. An inclusive community can make room in its agenda's for the voice of the outsider – who, after all, may well bring the voice of Christ.

A tolerant community will protect its current habits and priorities at all costs – and outsiders will be welcome as long as current habits of worshipping together, of meeting together and eating together are not questioned. An inclusive community is secure enough to allow its current habits to be questioned by newer members coming in.

A tolerant community will be keen to be perceived as an inclusive one.
An inclusive community has no need to claim anything of the sort.

But really – it's not up to members of a community to decide how they are to be described. The biblical word for that is hypocrisy! The responsibility of a community – through the lens of the current reading – is to ask how we would react to John the Baptist. If there is one thing that is clear from today's reading – it's that this voice crying out in the wilderness is the voice of an awkward so and so, a disturbing presence who shakes us out of our comfortable world of expectation as he draws our attention to the coming Messiah. This is not a leader who will do exactly as he's told.

And if the Messiah's herald is awkward, and disturbing, and undermines all that we value – how much more will the coming Messiah embody these annoying traits? Is this really the Christ that we want to encounter in worship? Is this really the Christ with whom we want to be in living, growing relationship? Is this really the Christ that we long for, whose coming into our lives we actively seek in the season of Advent?

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John the Baptist calls us to prepare the way for the Lord.