

## **Sermon for Sunday 14 July 2024 – The Seventh Sunday after Trinity**

**Pete Postle, Reader**

***Amos 7.7-15; Psalm 85.8-13; Ephesians 1.3-14; Mark 6.14-29***

May all I say and think be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen. Sit, please.

A somewhat gory gospel reading.

It inspired me to look back at what we know of the story of John the Baptist. June 24th, just gone past, every year, we celebrate his birth. So let me start with that. Luke's gospel tells us that John was the son of Elizabeth and Zechariah, a priest, and that Mary visits them when Elizabeth is, I guess, somewhat more than six months pregnant, perhaps to assist in midwifery duties. So there may be a family connection between Elizabeth and Mary, which would make John and Jesus cousins. And, of course, would explain Mary's visit to her aunt. Perhaps from that visit we can see why June 24th is chosen as John's birthday. It's six months before Jesus's birthday.

Zechariah's prophecy is that his son is destined to be the prophet of the most high, for he will go before the Lord to prepare his ways. That's from Luke. In time, many years, several years, John retreats to the wilderness, where he dresses in camel's hair and leather belt and eats locusts and wild honey, but then returns to near Bethany and the river Jordan to begin his prophetic destiny. He preaches of a terrifying figure to come who will separate wheat from chaff, preaching fire and baptising with the Holy Spirit. And moreover, says John, that person is here already, biding his time.

What should his listeners do? Confess your sins. Repent and be baptised. John's baptism was a single act of initiation, a purification from unclean ways, a moral transformation. Those who came in their thousands to be baptised in the river Jordan were the ordinary folk; soldiers, tax collectors, prostitutes, all confessing their sins and wanting to be people fit for the coming Saviour. And in those days, Jesus comes for baptism. You probably remember the story when the heavens are torn apart and the spirit descended like a dove upon him.

We cannot know for sure who, because different gospels have a different view of it. It could have been Jesus or John. For what it's worth, my belief, it is John who sees that dove. And it is that day that Jesus embarks upon his three year prophetic mission. But first, of course, Jesus is to spend 40 days and nights in the wilderness to work out how he best conduct the mission, how to avoid obvious pitfalls which would be more about publicity of his own powers rather than the works and power of God.

The year is AD 28/29; as it says in Luke, in the 15th year of the reign of the emperor Tiberius. Jesus is about 30 years old, John will be just six months older. When Jesus returns from those 40 days, John

recognises Jesus's superior role. Two of John's disciples become the first of Jesus's. Andrew is one of them. So that we recognise Andrew as the first named disciple.

John and Jesus agree to divide up so as to separately spread the gospel of the nearness of the kingdom of heaven on earth. John possibly to the northeast, up by the river Jordan and by Bethel; Jesus, to the villages of Galilee around the lake. Sometime later, John sends two of his followers to Jesus. Are you the one who is to come? Or are we to wait for another? Are you the Messiah, the Christ, for whom we have waited these centuries? Jesus replies by explaining how his healing works, his miracles are reflecting Old Testament prophetic predictions.

Herod has heard of John and listens to him. But as you hear in the gospel, John criticises Herod's rule, particularly his marital affairs. So Herod has John arrested and thrown into jail in the fortress of Machaerus. That's a hill fort in what is now the country of Jordan, and overlooks the river Jordan. At this banquet for his birthday, Herod Antipas succumbs to the plotting of his wife, Herodias, who uses the dancing of her daughter, also named Herodias, in this gospel, Salome in others, to demand John's execution.

I'm not going through it all again, you've just heard it. But to add to Mark's account, we have Josephus, the Jewish born Roman historian. He writes that Antipas suspected John the Baptist to be drumming up an insurrection against him, and that was the reason he had him executed. In around 753, 759 BC Amos similarly is outspoken about King Jeroboam in the northern kingdom, but is treated more sympathetically. Told to return to Judah, where he is a shepherd, a farmer, not a priest. Which parallel seems that Josephus record is rather more plausible, but less dramatic, if that's the right word, than Mark's justification for the killing of John. Is that the end of the story? Not quite.

We have little to record John's teachings, but we do know that his message continued for at least 30 years after his execution. You can find in Acts that Paul, when in Ephesus, meets Apollos, an Alexandrian, and about twelve other disciples who had been baptised by John but were not yet aware of the Holy Spirit, and therefore Jesus's teaching. Perhaps, though, we should return to the start of the New Testament reading to find the most of significance here. We heard that some followers of Jesus claim that Jesus is John the Baptizer raised from the dead, or Elijah? Herod's belief is that John has been raised from the dead and his power is demonstrated in the works of Jesus.

Those of our brothers and sisters who can't, for the life of them, understand why we believe what we do as Christians, sometimes put our religious belief down to such superstition as Herod demonstrates. That belief of ours can really be summarised by the first four words of our Creed; 'I believe in God'. Remember Moses's question to God; 'But when I come to the Israelites and say to them, the God of your ancestors has sent me to you, they'll ask me, what is God's name? What shall I say to them?' And God responds to Moses, 'I am what I am'. Or if you prefer a different translation, 'I will be what I will be'. This, says God, is my name forever.

It is from this enigmatic base that we must search for our answer. To those who doubt the existence of God, the important thing is that his name, the enigmatic name given to Moses, implies that God is what each generation of mankind believes he is. To put it another way, I don't think that Herod's visualisation of God would find much support in the early Christian church community, let alone today's liberal, secular world. Herod's view was based on superstition, on the belief of the angry, vengeful God of the Old Testament, the God who could give reward or punishment.

In the Middle Ages, the church found it necessary to return to a similar habit of ritual superstition and fear, to retain its hold on a largely uneducated populace. The early Christians, though, through the words of Jesus, were able to replace that view of God with the concept of an ever merciful, compassionate God, a God who wanted all creation to succeed, all men and women to love him and through him, one another, all lost sheep to be found.

However, that concept alone was not enough to convince the Hellenists, who included the intellects of those days. So, for example, we find Philo, another Alexandrian, a Jew of the first century, talking of God in Plato's terms as the logos, the word, the all enveloping power of reason. Well, we know why that should be relevant, don't we? Because if we read the first chapter of John's Gospel, to see how John adopts the idea of the word logos, to explain the understanding of Jesus, the Messiah, into terms that his Greek speaking congregations can accept. As a result, Gentile Christians would soon vastly outnumber Jewish Christians. And as a result of that, we still have Christianity. But God never changes; he is what he is, which should encourage us that our understanding of him should never stop developing until such time as God deems mankind worthy to receive the ultimate revelation of his true being; to know his glory, as the Bible puts it; he will be what he will be.

From this it follows that nothing need ever shake your belief in God. Life's triumphs and tragedies might make you question your current set of beliefs on how or why he acts or does not act as he does. But rest assured it's only your limited knowledge of his nature that's the problem. So such experiences to revise and update your knowledge of God; to realise it is even greater than you previously thought. You'll just be doing what mankind has always done since God first gave it power to think for itself. It's why we're here on this world in the first place to progress towards a greater understanding of God and to help develop his creation because of that understanding. Amen.