

Thought for Wednesday 24th June 2020

Today is mid-summertime and marks the celebration in the church calendar of the birth of St John the Baptist. He is mentioned in the Gospels as being the one who was the forerunner to Jesus, and in his preaching foretold his coming as well as the coming of the Kingdom of God.

His father was Zachariah who was a temple priest and his mother was Elizabeth, who was a cousin to the Virgin Mary. Both his parents were descendants of Aaron. John was conceived when his parents were both old and past what was normally considered child-bearing age. His father attending to his duties burning incense in the temple one day when he was told by the Angel Gabriel that he would be born and that his name was to be John. It was to his mother that Mary went to after she had the meeting with the angel who told her she would conceive Jesus.

In both the gospels and in the works by the Jewish historian Josephus, he is mentioned as being an eccentric and reclusive character. He took to living in the wilderness, dressed in clothes made of animal hair and ate locusts and wild honey. Nonetheless, he went about the area preaching that the Hebrews were not living in accordance with the covenant, but being selective about their interpretation of the Law. He told them they needed to repent and to live in righteousness with each other and in piety with God. Also, the day of reckoning was at hand and those who could understand his message needed to mend their ways and live righteously. He was most definitely "A voice crying out in the wilderness".

Needless to say, these messages, while gathering him a following – including Peter and Andrew who became Apostles of Jesus – he was not someone that the authorities could ignore. He (and only he) made a marked difference to Jesus and the Apostles – baptised his followers not as an act of remission of sin, but as an act of repentance for the purification of the body presuming that the soul was purified beforehand by righteousness through repentance.

We also read in the Bible that on an occasion when he and Jesus were in the same locale, Jesus went to his gathering and was himself baptised to show his righteousness and at which time John proclaimed him "the Lamb of God" who

had come to take away the sins of the world and that he who came after John would baptise with the Holy Spirit.

John in his railing against the way the people were following the Laws made pointed comments about the King, Herod Antipas, who had broken the Law by marrying his Niece and his Sister-in-Law, Herodias. At one-point John's popularity was gaining such strength that Herod had him arrested and put in prison to curb his influence and the unrest it was causing. However, that did not stop John and even from prison he still got his message out to his followers. This led to the famous story where Herodias wanting John silenced prevailed on her daughter, Salome who danced for the King, to ask for John's head as a reward for her performance. And so, John was beheaded and his head "served up on a platter" to Salome.

By this time the followers of Jesus were gaining in numbers and it can be assumed that many of John's followers found a cause they could easily align to in Jesus.

How does the story of John relate to the bible passages for today from Judges 6 and Matthew 5?

Judges 6 talks about a time when the Israelites had just settled in Canaan and had repeatedly fallen out of the habit of maintaining the Covenant of Moses. In punishment for this God put them under the heel of the Midianites for seven years. It might be recalled that Moses married the daughter of the Priest of Midian when he left Egypt So there is a connection in this act. After the seven years the people were fed up with their oppression and God chose Gideon, who was a vineyard farmer and told him he was chosen to lead his people out of their oppression. Gideon asked How? He had no army large enough to defeat that Midianites or their allies as his clan was the weakest of the tribe of Manasseh and he was least in the tribe. God told him that he would be with him and it would all come to pass as he had been told. So, being a man of faith, he went forth and was successful.

The reading from Matthew, follows immediately on from the "Sermon on the Mount" and Christ is still addressing the multitude. He calls them the "salt of the Earth" but notes that if salt loses its saltiness, it is fit for nothing except to

be thrown away and trampled underfoot. He goes on to use another analogy and tells them they are “the light of the world” - a town that is built on a hill cannot be hidden! That people light a lamp not to hide it away under a bowl but to place it so that it gives light to everyone in the house. Concluding by telling them that in the same way to let their light shine before others that they may see your good deeds and Glorify your Father in Heaven.

But that’s not enough to concrete the message from the main sermon. He tells them that he has not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets – BUT TO FULFILL THEM. He assures them that until heaven and earth disappear, not the least letter will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Therefore, anyone who sets aside the Law, the least of these commands and teaches that way to others will be called the least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever lives and preaches these commands will be called great. And here he makes the “point of this statement clear – “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.”!

As he has their undivided attention, Jesus then tells the masses that “they have heard it was said to the people long ago that “you shall not murder” and anyone who does will be subject to judgement”. This is the 6th commandment of the Law of Moses and everyone would recognise that. However, Jesus goes on to take it to a new level. He says “I tell you that anyone who is ANGRY with a brother or sister will be subject to judgement. Or if you call them bad names of a fool will be in danger of hell.

He tells them so if you are offering your gift at the altar and remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your offering at the altar, then go and be reconciled with them and then you can return and make your offering.

Throughout these two passages the message is the same as that which John the Baptist had been crying in the wilderness about. To repent on your misdoings and live in righteousness with those around you and in piety with God. Don’t just pay lip service for that renders you worthless too and God sees it all and knows the truth. We’re lying to ourselves if we think otherwise. It’s

a hard message and not easy to stick to but that's the point. As the Israelites in Gideons time were beset by oppressors, this was to test their faith too.

We have our own tests of faith and in dealing with them need to remember to stay with the message of John and from Jesus at the sermon on the mount. At one time the "Beatitudes" that Jesus enumerated in his sermon were routine parts of Christians upbringing and education and something that many could recite from memory. We seem to have lost that simple means of keeping Jesus message in front of us. Perhaps we need to re-learn?? We need to be the salt of the earth, the light of the world, like John we need to point out the "inconvenient truths" to those around us – especially our leaders – to keep them with a strong moral compass too. It's doubtful that in this day and age we will suffer the penalty incurred by John by being relentless in the pursuit of strong faith and morals, but there are probably, less terminal, ways we could also have "our head served up on a platter" and we need to not be afraid to tell the truth and shame the devil if that is what God is calling us to do.

When one looks back in history at today's date you can find through a simple search of the internet, many interesting, curious, and abstract things that occurred. Not all have been nice and pleasant by any means. One that occurred in 1951 doesn't get a mention usually, but was the day I entered the world. Why do I mention it now? Is this the most extreme hubris anyone could indulge in? Possibly. But I mention it because my family name when translated from its original Gaelic means "Son of the servant of St John". So, if you ascribe to there being no such things as coincidences, then I can only aspire to be as good a servant as St John the Baptist, no matter what the cost.

To that end I close with a hymn that St John would probably has empathised with – even though he would not have remotely known it by the name we associate with it today.

<https://youtu.be/-7GzUvGiF48>