

A sermon preached at St. Michael & All Angels Church Sandhurst on Sunday 15th December 2024 by Emma Hodge

**Readings:**

Luke 3:2b-18 (Actual reading set is 3:7-18 – previous week gospel is Luke 3:1-6)

Zephaniah 3:14-20

A Song of Deliverance (*Isaiah 12.2-6*)

**Theme:** The Preaching of John the Baptist

*May the words of my lips and the thoughts and meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight O Lord our strength and our Redeemer, Amen*

Today is the third Sunday in advent; Advent is where we prepare to celebrate the coming of Christ, both the celebration of the birth of Jesus as a child in Bethlehem and also looking forward, and preparing for the coming of Christ as Judge, what is often referred to as Christ's second coming.

There are different interpretations as to what the weeks of advent can stand for

If you attended the Advent service you would have heard John mention the four themes of Advent being Hope, peace, joy and love. Joy is also one of the themes for the third Sunday in Advent

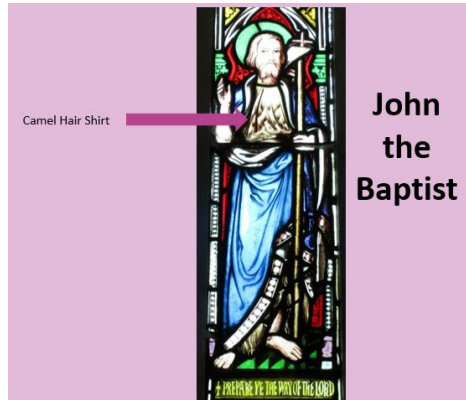
However, we are more used to hearing about the Patriarchs, the Prophets and today we focus on John the Baptist. The theme of the service today is the “the Preaching of John the Baptist”.

Now if you were here last week, or caught up on the sermon online you may be thinking, but didn't last week cover John the Baptist as well, and you would be right, this is because the compilers of the lectionary split the story into two weeks (and if anyone can tell us the reason, please let us know!). But don't worry, today's sermon is going to be different from last week's message.

Last week, John Castle explored with us how the Old Testament prophets (the theme for the second week in Advent) foretold that there would be someone who would come to prepare the way for Christ's coming and that John the Baptist had a role in this as a prophet. John the Baptist, as who in the traditions of the prophets warned people to change their behaviour. While there had been a history of prophets in the old testament, there hadn't been one for many centuries .

John Castle went on to say how we need to prepare and share the true meaning of Christmas with others.

Today we are looking at John the Baptist, the person, his message and how it relates to us.



## Who is John the Baptist

Before we start looking at the *Preaching of John the Baptist*, I want to remind us

a bit of who John the Baptist is, he was born to his parents Zechariah and Elizabeth in their old age. The story of his conception and birth is recorded in Luke's gospel chapter 1.

We know from the other gospels that John wore a camel hair shirt and if you look carefully in our window you can see this detail. His diet consisted of locusts and wild honey.

Because John the Baptist lived in the wilderness and was offering a baptism of repentance which required a river, this means that people had to go out to him.

## Fulfilling prophecies

However, John the Baptist came to fulfil the Old Testament prophecies telling us that there would be someone who would come just before the Messiah and as we looked at last week with John, the coming of John the Baptist fulfilled the prophecies in Isaiah and Malachai his job would be to prepare people for the longed for Messiah's coming. The crowd understood this to be

Jesus first coming, his teaching that he would shortly start to give.

## **Message of John the Baptist**

The first words that John the Baptist is recorded as speaking to the crowds in Luke's gospel not one of welcome or gentle encouragement, it is not one with a nice story, instead his message starts with a sense of confrontation and of urgency,

His opening words are **"you brood of vipers"**. This certainly would get people's attention – it is not how people are normally addressed. In Luke's gospel we are told that John the Baptist addressed the crowd, the crowd containing everyone who came, the crowd would have contained a mix of ethnicities and social standing. The people who formed part of the crowd had travelled from their own homes, villages, towns to meet John the Baptist and then they were addressed as **"you brood of vipers"**.

John's tone in his preaching continues to be hard-hitting and confrontational.

"Who told you to flee from the coming wrath"? The wrath that John was referring to was God's wrath. For the people in the crowd, the idea of God's wrath would have been a lot more familiar to them than it is to us today as the Old Testament has different instances of God's wrath being shown to the people of Israel.

John the Baptist then continues to shake a core aspect of Jewish identity, a lot of Jews thought that they would be saved just

because their ancestor was Abraham. John's preaching was that every person who does not bear good fruit would not be saved.

John addressing the crowd like this wanted people to wake up and not feel that they have plenty of time to develop their relationship with God, to sort their lives out. Lives are busy, how many times do you hear "I don't know where this year went?" or similar.

This is just the sort of attitude that John the Baptist was trying to address. There were people in the crowd who thought that everything was OK, that they were safe from God's wrath because their ancestor was Abraham. Without realising that they need to act and have the personal relationship with God and put His word into their lives.

We can fall into similar traps, of thinking that we have plenty of time left in our lives to sort out our relationships with God, or do we feel that we will be OK because we come to church each week and that we try our best.

But this is not enough, we need to ensure that we have a personal relationship with Jesus each day and in all areas of our lives, and this often involves work. We need to prepare to meet Jesus when he returns as judge and king.

We need to put our faith into action, into every part of our lives so that we can prepare to meet Jesus when he comes as judge and king.

John's message was urgent, he knew Jesus, they were related and John was only a few months older than Jesus as the pregnant Mary went to her cousin Elizabeth who was also pregnant (see Luke 1)

John knew that Jesus coming was soon, and he gets this point across in his message. When the crowd grasped the urgency that the Messiah was coming, who we know as Jesus was coming, they asked John for practical advice how they could prepare to meet Him.

In response, John gives practical advice, relevant to the various people, to be honest, to treat people fairly, to live a righteous life. These messages are the same for us, to be honest in our lives, to treat people fairly and to prioritise a relationship with God.

John had to correct the crowd that he wasn't the Messiah and that someone else was coming shortly. That person would have a winnowing fork in his hands.

Now I'm pretty confident that most of us don't use a winnowing fork in our daily lives but this would have been more familiar to the crowd listening to John the Baptist.

it is a large fork that is used for separating wheat from the chaff,





the pile of grain was thrown up into the air using a winnowing fork and due to the different densities, the chaff, which was lighter would be blown away leaving only the good wheat behind.

And I hope that you can now see the parallel with the judgement that Jesus will bring when he returns as judge.

While we may not use winnowing forks in our daily lives but that doesn't make the allegory any different,

We know that Jesus will return, we say it every week both in our creed where we say that "and he shall come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead"... and during the affirmation of faith where we say or sing

Christ has Died  
Christ is Risen  
Christ will come again.

And it is his return as judge that he will judge us and separate us like a farmer using a winnowing fork to separate the wheat from the chaff.

We don't often like to think, or talk about this point in the future when Jesus will be judging us, and how we have lived or are living our lives, but it is an essential element of our faith. It is not something to be afraid about or gloomy, but instead it is a reason for Joy, the joy that Jesus came to earth as a baby, the joy

that he will come again and when he does he will bring in a kingdom that never ends.

John's message is about being prepared to meet the coming Messiah – Jesus. Are we prepared to meet him, not just the babe born in Bethlehem, but when he returns again as judge and king?

## **Reflection Questions**

As this is the third Sunday there will be a period of reflection before our intercessions, and you might like to consider these three questions

1. What does it mean to you that Jesus will return?
2. How would you prepare if you knew that Jesus was going to return next month?
3. Would you change anything about you and how you live your life?