

Laggan and Newtonmore

Church of Scotland

Rev. Catherine Buchan

New Thinking

Sunday Jan 13th

Malachi 3:1-4

Luke 3:1-22

The early part of Luke's gospel shows us the angel Gabriel heralding two births: that of John and that of Jesus, and then we see those births take place. The Christmas story is about babies, and for good reason – all of us begin our lives that way, and so God's messenger and God's incarnate Son also began their lives that way. But no one stays a baby: people grow up.

In the growing up department, we get only one glimpse of Jesus, aged 12. Do you remember what you were like when you were aged 12? Have you changed much? The story of Jesus we have, which shows him on his first adult trip to Jerusalem, up for the pilgrimage, tells us that by that time, Jesus already had developed some traits that were not to change as he grew. He knew that God was his Father ("Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" Luke 2:49). He was deeply curious about God – and so he spent the days when his parents were frantically looking for him asking deep questions. And he was also deeply thoughtful, so that when he in turn answered questions posed to him – this was one standard way of teaching, to have the student think about questions – people were impressed by his answers. Jesus grew and matured, mainly in obscurity. We know that in the next eighteen years when he was back, maturing in Nazareth, he took on his earthly father's trade, and so was known later as the carpenter.

But what of John? John, Jesus "cousin" (although we are not told exactly what the relationship was between Mary and Elizabeth, the two mothers). How did he grow up? We are not told, but there is a lot that we can be pretty sure of, when we think about it. For one thing, John would be in Jerusalem. That was where serving priests lived, with their families. He would be at the centre of things, politically and religiously, living the privileged, comfortable life of the priestly upper classes. And just as

Jesus followed Joseph into the joiners trade, so John would have been expected to follow Zechariah into the priesthood. In fact the expectation would have been stronger for John, as you could not choose to be a priest, the way you might choose any other career or way of making a living. You had to be born into the priesthood, born into the tribe of Levi, and to a priestly family. John's future was set out for him at birth.

Except that before birth John's future was also set out, and it was that future which found him. The angel had said of him "...even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him...to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." (Luke 1:15-17) Now John might have done this by acting as a conventional priest, just possibly; but the priests served God by serving a system, and that system, John must have seen, would make it hard for an individual voice to be heard.

The priests offered sacrifices, they officiated at festivals and they performed ritual cleansings known as baptisms. We tend to think of baptisms as a Christian thing and something that began with John, but in fact Jerusalem was well used to baptisms because the temple drew pilgrims from distant lands to worship there, and these people, though usually Jews, were deemed to be unclean as a result of contact with people of other religions and cultures. Several special baths had been constructed around the temple so that worshippers could wash off that contamination and present themselves to God as "clean" people again. This was another way to preserve religious identity during a time of occupation and domination by "unclean foreigners".

John, who must have seen many such baptisms, decides that this is the ritual that he wants to use to show to his own people, the people who think that they are "clean", that they have fallen far from God's standards and need to prepare themselves for God's servant

coming among them. He might have tried to do this using the baths around the temple, but instead John decides that it is time to make a break from temple worship with its formulae and formalities and he appears over eighty miles to the north and east of Jerusalem, shockingly performing baptisms in the Jordan river. In public! In the countryside! You have to wonder what Zechariah made of it all – if he was still alive. As a priest's son, John would be known, and you can imagine the gossip about him trading the luxurious robes of the priesthood for the rough garments of a beggar and the high class menu of Jerusalem for the most

basic subsistence fare of the wilderness. When twelve hundred years later a young nobleman scandalised Assisi by abandoning the rich life of his merchant father to become a religious mendicant, Francis was following quite closely to the pattern set by John.

By re-locating away from Jerusalem, John was making a point about the temple which his father served, and about the religious establishment which it housed. He was showing that he, who knew the temple set up from behind the scenes, knew that it was not all it was held up to be. It was corrupt and was too closely enmeshed with the government – that foreign, ungodly government.

And while we are thinking about John and his set up, we should pause to think too about our own. We are part of an established church, which has had and still claims to have the “right” to speak for Scotland on matters religious. Our denomination kirks parliament and city councils and offers God’s blessing at civil events. Now maybe this is a good thing, but maybe this is something that we should not just accept as what ought to be (because it always has been). Maybe this is something which we should be continually questioning, so that we do not let anyone get the idea that the church is an arm of the state or that our faith can be expressed in terms of political affiliation or solely in the actions of good citizens. One of the worst disservices we can do to the good news of Jesus is to allow people to think that to follow Jesus is to conform.

And John came to the Jordan, which was more than a river: it was a boundary, the boundary which the people of Israel had had to cross to enter their promised land. By baptising Jewish people there he was saying that they had to enter their promised land over again, making a whole new beginning. What people needed, he was saying, was a change in orientation, a change of heart. People needed a different kind of cleanliness – one that couldn’t come from a conventional ceremonial bath in a holy temple.

It was outrageous – it was meant to be. John had a point to make and he made it when he said, “Do not begin to say to yourselves “We have Abraham as our ancestor.” (v:8) For the identity which mattered to John and which still matters, is not one which can be inherited through tribe, nationality or formal religion. The identity that matters is that created by your own actions – by sharing your wealth, possessions and food with those in need, by refusing to participate in the corruption so common in governments and businesses, by treating others fairly and respectably, by not being driven by greed. John called people to repent – as Jesus

was to do as well – and that word means to turn around and do things differently. Repentance is not just a feeling or an intention, it is not just being sorry for the past: repentance is action.

And John's movement grew. He had been right to strike out from the temple, to do something different, to live the message he was proclaiming (it is always important to live what we say, and often it is the greatest challenge). John's was a message of warning and of hope, and it was the hope which drew people to hear the warning.

Among the crowds coming to be baptised one day was a young man, about John's age. By receiving John's baptism he, as all the others, identified himself with this growing protest movement in the Galilean countryside. His actions said that this was a good thing a right thing, a necessary way of thinking and acting. And as he came up out of the water something happened. Luke does not make clear if this was something that others could see

and hear or if it was for Jesus only. But certainly Jesus knew the descent of God's Spirit on him and heard his Father's voice say, "You are my son, whom I dearly love, I am pleased with you."

So what Jesus had claimed about God when he was twelve – that God was his Father – God now echoed back to him when he was aged about thirty, standing dripping by a riverside. And what Jesus was to teach from then on was that this warm parent/child relationship with God was not just a special thing for him, but one in which we could all share. This was to be a distinctive and important part of his teaching.

The way that Jesus experienced the coming of God's Spirit is important too. God came to him in the shape of a dove – a dove which already had long been used as an emblem of peace and good news – think back to Noah and the dove which brought good news of hope to the Ark. There were other badges he could have come under, which would have been equally scriptural – he could have received God as a lion, for instance – the lion of Judah. He could have come under the badge of the eagle, a symbol for strength. But he was given God's Spirit in the form of a dove. Likewise when John first saw Jesus and showed him to his disciples (as we read about in John's gospel) he didn't say "Behold the lion of Judah, to avenge our enemies," but "Behold the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." To remove sin, rather than avenge it – that was an agenda for peace indeed.

Jesus stepped on the stage, fully come of age as the lamb of God anointed by the dove-like Spirit of peace, and with his identity deeply rooted in the profound realisation that he was God's beloved child. He was following in his Father's footsteps. John's rather more fiery call to repentance, to radically changing what we do, to do things in God's way of justice and peace, in fact brings us to this joyful and hopeful place for ourselves. For when we turn around and live in a different way, we will find that God also comes to us and whispers "You are my beloved child, I am pleased with you."