In the oratory of St John's Cathedral in Malta hangs a remarkable picture. Commissioned by the Knights of Malta, perhaps in honour of their own patron saint, and painted by Caravaggio at the height of his powers, it depicts the moment of death of John the Baptist. On a huge canvas, in a masterpiece of light and dark and shadow, Caravaggio picks out the inert body of the saint, blood flowing from his neck; the executioner drawing a knife to sever the head to fulfil his gruesome instructions; the shocked bystander, hands to her own head; his fellow prisoners, straining to see through their barred window; and the palace servant, waiting with her golden platter to bear that head to Salome who has lured Herod into this shocking crime. In size, in technique, in tension, the painting overwhelms you. But as you step back you ask yourself: who was John the Baptist? Who was that man lying on the floor in a pool of blood?

It's a hard question to answer because we only catch glimpses of his life: fragments of the beginning, the middle and the end. At the beginning, he's celebrated even before his birth as the cousin of Jesus, the son of Elizabeth and Zechariah. He leaps in Elizabeth’s womb when the pregnant Mary comes to visit. In the middle of his life we see him clothed in camel hair, eating locusts and wild honey, excoriating those who seek him out as a “brood of vipers” – and baptising, baptising, baptising. And at the end, after calling Herod out for unlawfully marrying Herodias, his brother’s wife, he languishes in jail until Salome does her fateful dance. Glimpses of a remarkable life, but no more than glimpses. Who was John the Baptist?

We aren't alone in asking that. In today's reading the Priests and Levites come out from Jerusalem to the River Jordan to ask him: Who are you? And he answers them with a series of negatives. Are you the Messiah? No. Are you Elijah? No. Are you the Prophet? No. Well, who are you? And he answers them by quoting Isaiah. He is the messenger, the one who precedes the Messiah. Why do you baptise if you're only the messenger, they ask? It's only with water he says, the real thing is still to come. And so they go away none the wiser. John the Baptist: who are you?

Particularly at this time of year, we see John the Baptist solely as the curtain raiser for Jesus. As the herald of the Messiah, only days, weeks in front of his master. Particularly in the timeline of Advent we get a little mixed up, perhaps, and see John as the one who stewards us through the short wait to the birth of Jesus. But John is much more important to us than that – and for two reasons. Two reasons that relate to us today. Two reasons that help answer that critical question: “who are you”?

First, John is emphatically human. Despite the divine favour shown to the elderly Elizabeth and Zechariah, this man John is flesh and blood; temper and attitude; caring and love. There’s nothing stuffy or pious about him. He calls it as he sees it; he has no pretensions and claims nothing. He is not divine. For him there is no Elijah-like ending, swept up to heaven in the whirlwind by the chariot and the horseman of Israel. His end on earth, and end it is, is in the courtyard of a prison, in a pool of blood, with an executioner pulling out a knife to fulfil the obscene request of Herodias, Herod’s scheming wife. This John was fully human.

Jesus might seem to belittle John when he says that “among those born of women there is none greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” But, of
course, he is not belittling him; the point he is making is that John is human. Not divine. Not superhuman. Remarkable, yes; outstanding, yes; the best of the best, yes. But human. So that’s the first answer to “who are you?” John is human.

The second answer, the second reason why John is important to us today, is that he is the forerunner, the herald, the one who goes ahead. And there are in turn two aspects to this. First, John clearly precedes Jesus. He announces that one greater than he is coming. He makes clear that he’s only the warm-up act. He raises expectations and gets the crowd going. That’s important – preparing people for the arrival of the Son of God is important. But there’s also a second crucial aspect to this role. The period before Jesus arrives is a time of waiting, but John doesn’t fill it by just talking. He prepares people for what is to come by starting to change them. By shaking them out of their torpor, or selfishness, or sinfulness or whatever it is that holds them back. Proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

And by doing that, while making clear that he is only baptising with water – not the fire and Spirit that Jesus was to bring – he nevertheless ushers people into a period of active waiting. The new time might not yet have arrived, but the old time has ended. The time of change is upon then, and John is shepherding them into that, making them aware of its possibilities. So, to answer for the second time, “who are you?” John the Baptist is the forerunner, the human herald of God’s son, and the one who prepares God’s people in a time of waiting to be ready for the arrival of his son.

So we have sketched out an answer to the question of who was the man we first saw lying in the courtyard in the pool of his own blood. But there’s a little more to it than that – because I want to ask the question again, but with a different emphasis: “who are you?” Who are you in this time of waiting? The historical Jesus, whom John preceded, started a process, launched a new covenant, gave us a guide to living. He lived, and died and rose for us. But while he began things, he did not end them. That is yet to come. The return of Jesus; the perfecting and making new of God’s creation has yet to happen. And so, today, we – you and I – are in the middle of a period of waiting. Not just Advent, not just for the baby Jesus, not just for the coming year, but for the day when everything will be fulfilled – a day whose time we do not know, and which may only come when we and our children and our children’s children are long dead. In that setting of uncertainty: who are you?

It is in this context that John the Baptist can be your guide. You, like him, are human. Not divine. But you, like him, have also been given a message, an insight, a gift. You are to be a herald and a forerunner. But not just of what is to come in the distant future – whether it’s the final day, or heavenly consolation – but, rather, about how now, today, through a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins our lives and our world around us can be improved, while we wait – actively wait – for our Saviour to return.

We can witness to that message, to that hope, by showing in our lives – during this period of waiting – through words and actions what the Kingdom my look like when he comes. By showing through caring for others, through caring for ourselves, what healing, wholeness, reconciliation can look like. What a difference they can make in our lives and, through us, in the lives of those around us. The world is not yet made perfect, and will not be until the end of time, but right now by who we are, and by what we do, we can offer people glimpses of that promise, as the forerunners, the heralds that we are called to be.

So not just this Advent, or this Christmas, or in 2015, when someone ask you “who are you?” you can reply: like John, I am a human who waits, and watches, and prepares, and acts. I am a human who announces – through my life itself – the certain knowledge of the return of Jesus Christ and the perfection of all things. That is who you are. That is, I hope, who I am.

Amen.