

## **Sunday 24 June 2007: John the Baptist**

**Readings: Isaiah 40: 1-11; Luke 1: 57-66, 80**

### **In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord**

*A voice cries out 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.'*

The idea that God is inscrutable, loftily mysterious and beyond the comprehension of we human beings, although not an uncommon one, doesn't really emerge in scripture until we get to Isaiah. God is pretty 'in your face' really in the stories of Genesis for example. Think of his dealings with Adam and Eve or with the patriarchs. The expectation of a God who is remote and invisible, speaking from on high rather than walking in a garden or living in a tent, is also biblical of course but it's not often to be found before we get to Isaiah. In a book like Deuteronomy the clarity of God can feel almost imprisoning at times, but now the door is opened to mystery and to novelty – in its serious rather than frivolous sense – 'behold, I am doing a new thing' we read.

Can we begin again? That's an underlying question pulsing away through the writings of most of the prophets. The mysteriousness of God isn't an answer to that question but it provides the condition for an answer. God and Israel couldn't begin again if, with each side perfectly comprehensible and completely predictable to the other, the covenant between them still collapsed. But if one side, God's side, is sufficiently mysterious to the other that nothing could be predicted about it with total certainty then newness is again possible. Lives can begin again, seemingly intractable situations can start afresh.

A voice cries out 'in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God'. We keep today the birth of that rather strange character, John the Baptist. A voice crying out in the wilderness indeed. So much of the world feels like wilderness at the moment. Who are the voices crying out to us today? And what are they calling us to? Can we begin again? Do we want to? George Bush challenged us in his sermon last week to consider the possibility that we call on God to act in the situations 'out there' but not in our own lives, which we may prefer to keep to ourselves.

A review was published recently of a book that revealed the rather disturbing results of a piece of research. A group of people who from what I understand is called 'Generation Y' that is, 15 -25 year olds, was interviewed. If we fondly imagine that we detect around us signs that many people of that age are searching for something that makes life meaningful, even if they're not sure what it might be, then this study quickly disabuses us. It found that the over-riding world view of that generation finds that this world and all of life is meaningful for them as it is. That 'the pursuit of happiness and meaningful life has become the major preoccupation of life politics, shifting from the construction of a better tomorrow to a different today'.

The researchers found almost no evidence that this large sample group of young people were searching for 'a transcendent something else'. They just feel no need for God. If that's so, it poses all sorts of questions for the church.

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And yet perhaps God engages with this in ways that we wouldn't expect. These young people find the idea of God a strange one but might even God find himself strange? At the beginning of the God story as we have it that would seem not to be the case. In the opening verses of Genesis, in the story of creation, God is portrayed as having enormous self-confidence. He does what he does and he doesn't appear to question. But by the time we reach Isaiah we start to enter an area of the unknowable. Even though that unknowability is our rather than God's it marks a significant change. Up to this point it has usually been the great clarity of God's law rather than its obscurity that has been to the fore but now it seems as if God is starting to recognise how different he is from us, despite our being made in his image, and how baffling we can find that.

There is indeed something mysterious about those opening lines from the reading, lines that we may first have become familiar with through listening to 'The Messiah'. 'Comfort, O comfort my people says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.....' Mysterious because God and comfort hadn't been associated in scripture before. The voice of a God who notices and experiences the pain of others is a new voice and we see that extraordinary contrast of comfort and divine power which is later pictured so graphically 'See. The Lord comes with might and his arm rules for him.... And he will feed his flock like a shepherd and will gather the lambs in his arms'. Great strength and yet great tenderness. Mystery indeed.

Later we're faced with a series of rhetorical questions 'Who measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span...? Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord or as his counsellor has instructed him? Those tender opening words 'Comfort, comfort my people' have this improbable power behind them. And in that incongruity God speaks of his mysterious hiddenness – that to know him fully is beyond our comprehension but that he knows us, both tenderly and completely.

The message for the people of Israel was that they had been forgiven their sins, that their days of exile would soon be over and that the ruined city of Jerusalem would be rebuilt and repopulated. But, as so often seems to be part of God's wish for us, what was to be new was not simply to be a repeat of what had been in the past because the people who had been in exile and who had experienced all that that meant, had come through into a wider world. They were to be led into an on-going life that was different from much that they had known before. And that isn't necessarily easy. It may come more naturally to us to fall back into old patterns. Think back to Lent for example. If any of us tried to make changes to our spiritual life during those 40 days were we relieved when Easter came so that we could slip back into old ways and feel that we'd done our bit? Or did we respond to the voice calling us onwards? A voice cries out 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God'.

This can be a very hard call, hard to believe fully perhaps and hard to do. There are many promises of God's blessing in scripture but we may often struggle to relate them to ourselves or to the world. We say that God is among us, is in our midst, but we may wonder or question that because of the mess of our own lives and the mess of the world we live in and so our faith may not be a comfortable one. We want to believe in God's presence, we want to believe in God's kingdom here and now but yet we know that that is far from fully realised as around at situations of war and aggression, of hunger or abuse.

The hope of the prophets was that 'the Lord would suddenly come to this temple' and so the temple feels a very appropriate place for us to be introduced to John – who would go on to

become a voice crying out – a herald of Christ. All the male descendants of Aaron were priests, entitled to officiate at temple sacrifices. They were divided into groups, each of which served twice a year for a week at a time. There were so many priests in each group that the duties for each morning and evening service were assigned by lot. That time of service was seen as a great privilege and the drawing of lots was waited for with anticipation. The most coveted task was the burning of incense, with the rising smoke symbolising the congregation's prayers going up to God, and then the priest concerned would come out from the sanctuary and pronounce God's blessing. No one was allowed to do that more than once and many priests never had the opportunity.

So, when the lot fell to Zechariah it was a powerfully special day – but for him also overcast by the shadow of his and Elizabeth's childlessness. As he offered prayers on behalf of the congregation he experienced a sense of God communicating with him about the gift of a son, John, who would 'turn many people to God' and be a herald for his coming. God communicates with us in many ways and our own personal context and experience forms part of our preparation for that – even though we may not always realise it. Even Zechariah found the news more than he could really believe and he asked for proof. But, tempting and human as it is, we're not to look for certainty or infallibility or proof but to try, instead, to discern and recognise what is authentic and true.

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