

JOHN THE BAPTIZER

Why is an obscure figure of the Bible relevant for us today? John the Baptizer is a witness to Jesus, the Son of God and our Saviour. He is born to an elderly couple and given the name John which means 'God is gracious'. As an adult his chosen surroundings bear witness to his unusual qualities. He is a man of the desert and we know that 'from deserts the prophets come' because they have the space and silence to listen to God. Within John's solitude, he is able to hear the voice of God.

Between the centre of Judea and the Dead Sea exists one of the most austere deserts of the world. John made it his home. I remember travelling with an Israeli army major through this white harsh place towards Jericho. Our driver had a small pistol tucked under his thigh, just in case.

John's manner of dress is different. He clothes himself in camel's hair – bet that was itchy! But riches make us soft. And he eats plain old locusts and wild honey. John the Baptizer was a fiery man with a humble nature. The job of carrying sandals was for the lowliest slave – yet he didn't think he was even good enough for that. He saw his own needs and status in life as unimportant. He wasn't jealous about the crowds going to see Jesus. Instead he said, 'He must increase, but I must decrease.' John not only preaches the message; he is the message yet he points to someone beyond himself. 'One mightier than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals. I have baptized you with water, he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

I don't think John would be popular even today. We see him disturbing the comfortable when he said to the religious ones, 'You nest of snakes? What do you think you're doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to deflect God's judgement? It's your life that must change, not your skin. And don't think you can pull rank claiming Abraham as father.' Or – God can see straight through you. Your religious affiliation means nothing unless you are given over to God. .

They ask him, 'What are we supposed to do?' John cuts right to the quick, 'If you have two coats, give one away. Do the same with your food.' Be practical in your faith. Spiritual and blood ancestry don't mean anything in God's eyes. Some of the powerful did repent including tax-collectors and soldiers. John told the former, 'Exact no more than the appointed rate.' And the latter, 'no intimidation, no extortion, be content with your pay.'

One day Jesus came to Bethabara where John lived by the River Jordan and asked his cousin to baptize him. John called out to the crowd, 'Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!' How extraordinary – yet they all knew what he meant. They were Jews who were familiar with the sacrifice of the spotless lamb each year for the sins of the people. John's key word is REPENTANCE. The Greek word used is *metanoia* = a change of mind, and purpose and life.

Later John was arrested by Herod Antipas and imprisoned at the fortress of Machaerus on the eastern shore of the Dead Sea. The Gospels tell us that Herod imprisoned John because of his wife Herodias. History reports that Herod was first married to the daughter of Aretas, a Nabatean king. On his return once from Rome, he visited his half-brother Philip, and was smitten with Philip's wife, Herodias. He influenced her to leave his brother, and then he divorced his own wife. The two, Herod Antipas and Herodias, thus entered an unlawful live-together relationship. It was inevitable that John and Herod would clash. We recall that it was their daughter Salome who danced for Herod and pleased him to such an extent that she was given anything she desired. It was to be the beheading of the prophet John the Baptist.

The Jewish historian Josephus says Herod arrested John because his preaching attracted large crowds and he feared it might create a revolt. Josephus also wrote kindly of John, 'Now some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment of what he did against John, that was called the *Baptist*; for Herod slew him, who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism.'

Back to our first question. 'Why is an obscure figure (like John the Baptist) relevant for us today? He lived to point people to Jesus. We too have no higher calling. May it be so, for his name's sake. AMEN

