

Sermon for Evensong on the Nativity of John the Baptist, 24th June 2018
Malachi 4; Matthew 11:2-19

Malachi 4:5-6: Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord:

And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.

Matthew 11:11-14: I tell you this: never has there appeared on earth a mother's son greater than John the Baptist, and yet the least in the kingdom of Heaven is greater than he.

12 'Ever since the coming of John the Baptist the kingdom of Heaven has been subjected to violence and violent men 13 For all the prophets and the Law foretold things to come until John appeared, 14 and John is the destined Elijah, if you will but accept it. 15 If you have ears that can hear, then hear. [Translations from the New English Bible - see <https://tinyurl.com/y957oykh>]

Sometimes I'm very conscious that we have come into church, and we're in a sort of bubble of 'churchness', a world away from our normal lives. I think that our celebration of John the Baptist may be a case in point. Many people, we read, flocked to hear John preaching his hellfire sermons, and queued up to be dunked in the River Jordan, to be baptised.

I don't know how many people this was, in precise numbers. Even though there wasn't any modern media, no radio or TV - and indeed without Facebook and Twitter - people somehow got to hear about John and flocked to hear him. But I don't know whether this was in thousands or in hundreds of people.

However many they were, they were looking for a saviour of the Jewish, the Israelite, people, who were in subjection under the rule of the Roman Empire. They talked about a 'messiah', God's anointed, chosen one, Χριστός, Christ, in Greek. When the Messiah had come, that would be the coming of the Kingdom of God. He would kick out the Romans and emancipate them.

How the Israelites got on, at more or less any stage in their history, depended on God, who had made a covenant, a contract, with them, according to which, if they kept God's commandments and worshipped only Him, the one God, then He would look after them, and they would be safe in their Promised Land.

If you were doing badly in any way, if you were hungry, or ill, or homeless, it meant that God was punishing you for some breach of His covenant.

The prophets, Isaiah, Nehemiah, Hosea, for instance - and Malachi, which we are told is a made-up name, which just means, in Hebrew, 'My Messenger', all provided a channel of communication between God and his chosen people. Elijah was the

greatest prophet: John the Baptist was introduced as the new Elijah. So John was the most reliable guide to the Messiah, he was the modern Elijah, according to Jesus.

Then along came Jesus, and effectively put John Baptist out of a job. John had sent two of his followers, disciples, to meet Jesus, to try to find out if he was indeed the Messiah. And Jesus answered by reeling off a list of miracles which he'd done. The idea was that, unless he was the Messiah, it wasn't possible that he would have been able to do all the amazing things that he had done: 'The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them.'

Jesus went on to identify John as a prophet, a truly great one, a 'messenger', to 'prepare the way' for Him. Bear in mind also at this point that the word we have translated as 'messenger', in the original Greek is *αγγελος*, 'angel'.

In some ways, although it's stirring stuff, I think this all sounds very alien, very different from our world today. In very basic terms, what would you think of as parallels with some of the things in the story? Do we have 'prophets' today? What would a 'prophet' look like? What would he - or she - do?

Can we parallel the way the Jews in Biblical times had this direct relationship with God, this channel through one or other of the prophets? They didn't say that things happened just because they had organised them; if something was going to work, to be successful, God had to bless it, it had to be in accordance with God's will. Or, to put it another way, if they left God out, if they were separated from God in some way, He would punish them. Things would go wrong.

How, as John the Baptist's disciples asked, how could they tell if someone was the real Messiah? It seems that Jesus was quite happy to point to the miracles which he performed, healing sick people, even reviving dead people - and even 'the poor are hearing the good news'.

We tend to be cautious about hanging our faith on miracles. We are worried that these stories of miraculous healing might turn out not to be true - or we may have to face people who give us scientific explanations which seem to rule out the possibility of divine intervention. We tend to say not that the miracles straightforwardly happened, just as the Bible described, but rather that there are stories in the Bible which stand for something mysterious, beyond our capability to understand; but that something did happen; because no other episode in history has resonated down the ages and made people change their lives so comprehensively and so consistently as the story of Jesus' three years of active ministry around 30AD.

The Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, wasn't what they expected him to be. He wasn't a great military leader. And similarly, the prophet, who foretold his coming, who 'prepared the way', wasn't a grand figure dressed in silks and satins. You will

remember, earlier in Matthew's Gospel, in chapter 3, we learn that 'John's clothing was a rough coat of camel's hair, with a leather belt round his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey'.

The whole thing was much more nuanced than the contemporary onlookers expected. 'Hail to the Lord's anointed, great David's greater son' says the hymn. But what was it to be 'the Lord's anointed'? That's the literal meaning of 'Messiah' or 'Christ'. I was talking the other Sunday about Arius, and his theology of Christ, or Jesus, as being a 'son' in the normal human sense, not in the Holy Trinity sense of being one with, consubstantial, co-eternal, with, God the Father.

Perhaps John the Baptist's prophecy foreshadowed a more Arian figure than we now think about. When John had baptised Jesus, a voice was heard saying 'This is my Son, the beloved'. Not, 'This is me in my human form'. Today I think we will tend not to get stuck in trying to interpret this. It is 'God talk', metaphor and myth, words, rather inadequate to encompass the divine mystery.

But then, and in the years that followed, right up to the fourth century, people were still arguing about what it all meant. Arius' ideas caused huge controversy in the early church.

Is there a message for us today? John preached repentance, repentance from sin. We understand that to mean that he asked people to change their minds, radically to change their attitudes, so as to bring themselves back into that close relationship with God which had done so much for His chosen people, the Jews, the Israelites.

Are we sinful? Do we need to 'repent'? Being sinful is being cut off, on a different wavelength, from God. Are we able to bring ourselves back into that close relationship, that 'covenant', with God? That is what today's Gospel is all about. We don't, on the whole, crowd around wild men in scruffy clothing preaching hellfire and damnation - like the sandwich-board men you used to see on the streets in London and Birmingham and the other big cities; or perhaps at Speaker's Corner in Hyde Park. We don't recognise prophets much any more.

But there are still great movements of belief, of faith. In the nine days between Ascension and Pentecost, in the worldwide wave of prayer called 'Thy Kingdom Come', millions of Christians all over the world were praying together, bringing themselves closer to God. In the global South, if not currently in the cool Northern Hemisphere - the Northern sophisticates are too 'cool', perhaps - Christianity is growing, growing far faster than any other faith. As Jesus said, 'The poor have the gospel preached to them'. We are part of it. We were part of it.

John said, 'Repent ye, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand'. Let's leave our comfortable 'bubble'. Let's change, change for the better. Really reflect on what we do in our lives, what we believe in, and compare it with what we know of Jesus. Are

we Good Samaritans? Bob Dylan sang, 'You're going to have to serve somebody'. Do we serve anybody? Do we look after the widow, the orphan, the stranger - the immigrant? Do we love our neighbour? Maybe John the Baptist still has a relevant message for us, even today.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant