

## SERMON

John the Baptist features this week and next - but I have found him something of an enigma to most Christians. How does he fit into the story of Jesus?

Those who lived 2000 years ago also found it hard to understand John the Baptist.

He looked strange - dressed in a camel-hair coat. He ate strange - locust and wild honey. He lived in a strange place - the desert. People were to discover that he had an even stranger cousin - Jesus.

But he said things that had to be said. He told it how it is - and that often does not win friends.

However, few people would have really understood what he meant when he declared that his mission was "to prepare the way of the Lord and make his paths straight".

Fewer still could even begin to understand him when he said "After me comes one whose sandals I am not worthy to untie".

And among those who responded to his words "Repent and be baptized" there must have been complete confusion when he declared "I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit".

John was a desert person - not a city person. His life was focused on God and he'd spent time there with God and learning from God. There was a different orientation to his life.

I know two strange people who have become hermits. They are Roman Catholics - a monk-priest and a sister. They live in separate places but both are becoming hermits - giving up

contact with people and the world to devote themselves to prayer and discerning the word of the Lord.

**There are things we cannot learn in this life unless we spend time with God and in prayer. There is too much noise, too much of everything.**

John was a desert person - and we are city people so where does he fit in and what can we take away from these readings in very different circumstances to our own lives?

**John the Baptist is the voice of Advent** - What he said was not merely a word about Jesus, it was the Gospel - as St Mark tells us it was the beginning of the Good News for the world.

John and his message happened at the beginning of Jesus' ministry on earth, and John, and his message, still are the beginning today for all those who want to walk with Jesus,

A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step.

John tells us about this step the way of the Lord must be prepared, it is a highway in our hearts, a direction and a step that we must take, if we are to be ready for Christ's coming.

**There is a story that comes from the Zen tradition** about an educated man who went to visit the great Zen master one day.

Master he said - teach me what I need to know to have a happy life. I have studied the sacred scriptures, I have visited the greatest teachers in the land, but I have not found the answer, please - teach me the way.

At this point the master served tea to his guest. He poured his visitor's cup full and then kept on pouring and pouring so that

the tea began to run over the rim of the cup and across the table, and still he poured, until tea was cascading upon the floor.

The professor watched this until he could no longer restrain himself. "Its full-up, stop, no more will go in" he cried out.

"Like this cup", the Master said, "you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you the way unless you first empty your cup?"

We are city people - are lives are full-up. We cannot stop being city people we do no have to become desert people to be empty. All the people who came to John were city people and he taught them how to be empty.

How can we welcome Christ, if we have no room in our hearts for him, if we are not prepared?

John the Baptist came to prepare the way of the Lord, by preparing the hearts of all who were willing to hear him and to repent.

John called to the people to hear his message and to take action

Repent, and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins, he cried out, for after me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.

### **What does the word repent mean?**

Quite simply it means to "turn around" to change direction, to face a new way, leaving the old way behind.

The wilderness we are in is contained in our hearts.

It is not what is outside that defines our wilderness rather it is what is inside, it is created by our actions, and by our inactions.

Do you, like me, struggle with a wilderness that is dry? Which keeps us feeling spiritually dry?

Busyness, Noise, pressured to be happy, compelled to spend money, appeals for this and that charity,

Repentance is not about beating ones breast and saying what a miserable sinner one has been, repentance is doing things in a new way, a way that gives life both to yourself and others. a way that allows Christ to enter more deeply into your hearts.

We do know something more about John the Baptist than did the people who first heard him 2000 years ago, we do know that the one who followed, the one that he called people to prepare for, was the Lord of Life, a man who bestowed health and wholeness on all who were ready for him.

John calls us to the new life revealed in Jesus, and he reminds us that if we are to have that life, we must do just a little more than want it, we must prepare ourselves for it, by changing our direction, by doing certain things differently than we have done them before.

Repentance is a beginning that is blessed by God a beginning that we need to make each day, one day at a time.

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.  
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her  
that her hard service has been completed,  
her sin has been paid for. AMEN

Some of this sermon is based on ideas from Rev. Richard J. Fairchild