
Why John the Baptist?

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 17 December 2023

Isaiah 61:1-4,8-11 • 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 • John 1:6-8,19-28



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

We know the story of John the Baptist. He was Jesus' cousin, the son of Mary's cousin Elizabeth, born about six months before Jesus was, and he had the same sort of upbringing in a nearby town. And he was also specifically called by God to perform a special service for God's people. He was the advance messenger, the town crier who went out among the people calling on them to repent. Why repent? Why now? Because the kingdom of God is at hand, and God's son is here.

But we may ask ourselves why God thought it necessary to send John ahead of Jesus. After all, Jesus showed himself perfectly well able to speak for himself. He gathered crowds wherever he went, and people came from near and far to listen to him, and to bring their sick friends and relatives for healing. John's message about Jesus, as related in the Bible, was a bit enigmatic — someone

who will baptise with the Holy Spirit, someone whose sandal straps John was not fit to untie (Mark 1:7-8). And it was not long into Jesus' ministry that John was arrested, to be eventually beheaded in prison. What then did John accomplish?

Perhaps John did reach some people whom Jesus might not have reached, and prepared them to hear something amazing, something life-changing. We do not get much information about John in the Bible, but his clearly stated intention was to make the paths smooth for Jesus, to clear the road for his coming. John collected his own disciples — they are mentioned in the third chapter of John's Gospel (different John, of course), when John the Baptist and Jesus are both busy baptising their disciples not far from each other. Those disciples would have followed John around the countryside and sat at his feet as he taught them, as other rabbis did in those times. John would have been teaching them about Jesus. Later on, John's disciples must have started following Jesus, after John's death. So it may be that John's preliminary teaching helped his disciples the better to understand Jesus' teaching later on. Perhaps John gave the introductory course, and Jesus taught the graduate course!

Or perhaps God arranged it this way to teach us something about how to make disciples. As Christians, we want everyone to know Jesus. Sometimes Jesus reaches straight out and touches a person's life, and they are changed in that instant. I have heard many stories about this happening, first-hand from the people to whom it happened, and it is always amazing and inspiring. But often it takes a Christian to introduce a non-Christian to Jesus. Someone who already knows Jesus can inspire another to take the first step in faith, after which God can do the rest. John perhaps models this for us, starting his disciples along a path which leads to faith in Christ.

We have to remember, though, that the people we're talking about were faithful Jews, who believed in God. So initially, the connection to be made for them is not the big leap from atheism or agnosticism to Christian belief, but from Jesus to God. They needed to learn to believe that Jesus is God's son, and that as Jesus said later, no one comes to God except through him. That is a radical change of belief for a faithful Jew. The God in whom they professed faith is still the same, but they have to get to know God all over again, through the revelation which Jesus brought to them. And the essence of that revelation is that Jesus is God. That was a stumbling-block for many, as Jesus says later.

Or again, God may have sent John the Baptist ahead of Jesus out of love for Jesus. It may have been a great comfort to Jesus to know, when he was setting out on his great journey of teaching and prayer and revelation, that his cousin had gone before him. It is comforting to know that someone is in your corner, and as much as Jesus is God, Jesus was still a very human young man, and the

mission God sent him on might have seemed a bit daunting at first. We have evidence of Jesus' humanity on the night before his arrest, when he prayed that he might be excused from his final task, if it were God's will. God planned that Elizabeth would become pregnant about six months before Mary did; that meant that John was just a little older than Jesus, and John might have been the older cousin Jesus looked up to when they were boys. To know that John had gone before him might have given Jesus just a bit of extra courage and reassurance.

Finally, God may have sent John ahead out of love for us. John was not God, as he makes clear to the Pharisees in today's Gospel passage. He's not the Messiah; he's not Elijah, he's not another prophet. (The fact that the Pharisees asked these questions showed that they saw John as someone out of the ordinary, although they didn't understand him.) John was just a man, born out of the usual union between his mother and father, although it was a miracle that Elizabeth could become pregnant at so great an age. But basically, John is like us. And God chose him to be the advance messenger for the Christ, the Messiah. Through this act, God shows us that anyone may be chosen for great things, to serve our Lord in great ways. And God loves us so much that he not only sent his only Son to show us the way to salvation — he sent John to show us that we all may be messengers for Christ. As we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ as a little baby in that humble stable in Bethlehem, let us also remember that we too may clear the roads and prepare the way for our Saviour to enter someone else's heart. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.