

What John The Baptist Thought

When I read the scathing words of John the Baptist in today's Gospel, I wonder how far he knew the mind of God. Prophets are imperfect vessels, like the rest of us; their actions are notoriously prone to mistake. If you think of the stormy relations that prevailed between the God of Israel and its patriarchs - Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the rest - you see at once how faithfully the Bible tells their story. No easy sanctity there! Read the story of Abraham trying to make the promises of God come by his own power, falling into lies and cruelty in the process: read the ugly story of Jacob deceiving his old, blind father. David murdered his most faithful friend to keep secret his adultery with the poor man's wife. The story of Jonah may be a bit of a fable, but it clearly depicts the truth that the task of being a prophet is something to be run away from; and in the writings of the real prophets we read the traces of times when they have tried to evade their divine calling. Ezekiel said the effort to deny his call nearly killed him. Jeremiah tried to convince God that he couldn't speak. Elijah lay down in the desert and asked God to kill him rather than make him a prophet.

“Doom, Doom, We're All Doomed....”

John the Baptist is depicted as a prophet of doom in today's Gospel. Was that really his message? He's also said to have gathered huge crowds to listen to him: were they all coming to listen to doom? I doubt it! So as Jesus will ask: *What did they go out into the desert to see?* At the beginning of his teaching John says something rather oblique: *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.* This word *kingdom* is very important. The Kingdom (or more accurately the *reign* of God) is the great treasure offered by Matthew's Gospel - our Gospel for the whole liturgical year that has just begun. John calls for people to change their minds (*repent*) because this reign of God is coming upon them. He criticised people's way of life, but he was also giving them the first knowledge of the coming Reign. When Jesus begins his mission, he does so with *exactly* the same announcement.

Heralds Of God's Reign

So Jesus and John are clearly very close to each other (*Luke's* Gospel will make them cousins to hammer home the point). But

there also seems to be a great difference. John's teaching, if today's onslaught on the Pharisees and Sadducees is any example, was fierce stuff, talking about retribution and harsh judgment: *the axe is laid at the roots of the trees.* Any tree failing to fruit will be cut down mercilessly. *So produce fruit that is in keeping with repentance!*

Grace And Healing

Jesus, instead, comes into the public eye first and foremost as the bringer of gifts. He teaches, he proclaims the good news, and cures all kinds of disease and illness among the people. He gathers massive crowds of the incurable and the deranged, and heals them all. Then he starts to speak of the Reign of God. It brings an eternal inheritance for the poor. It hands the earth over to the gentle. It comforts mourners. It fulfils the hopes of the hungry, and gives the merciful the same mercy they have shown; it rewards the pure in heart with the vision of God, it appoints peacemakers as children of God, it brings joy to all who have suffered for justice. And all of this comes before Jesus makes a single demand on anyone. Grace, not wages: mercy, not vengeance, healing, and not rejection.

Was John Wrong About God's Reign?

John the Baptist knew some things very clearly. He knew how far the world was from God. He knew what bad religion had done to people. He knew a lot about God's holiness, and he felt unholiness around him and within him as an almost physical pain; nothing else could have fuelled such anger in him, or made him so honest about his own unworthiness. He also knew that God was about to send a messenger who would be worthy to speak as a true prophet. We recognise that person in Jesus; and so, the Gospel says, did John. It could be that even John was shocked at the order in which Jesus began his mission. Herod and the Romans were still on their seats of power: the ghastly ruling priests were still doing some pretty awful crimes in the name of their politics and with the power their religion had given them. John himself will speak to Jesus from his condemned cell next week. I think it is vital for us to notice that even John could be shaken by the messiah he so bravely proclaimed. For us too, grace comes first. Then the demands. Stand by! *Fr Philip*