

## TWO SCENES

In the weeks before Christmas we think about people who were before Jesus and who challenged people to be ready for him.

And one of these is the strange and mysterious figure of John the Baptist. In today's readings we have two scenes from his life, which we'll look at today.

### Scene One.

The first scene we find at Matthew 3

John the Baptist seems like a seriously crazy guy.

In fact, the very kind of guy you would go out of your way to avoid.

There's so much that is just plain weird about him.

I made the point at last week's service that the Bible usually misses out on everyday information we would be curious to know more about.

Like we never hear a description of what people looked like. (Not even Jesus!)

Or what they wore.

Or what they ate.

Except when it comes to John the Baptist.

He was so off the scale that the writers just had to mention some of that kind of thing.

So we hear that he wore pretty bizarre clothes. Made out of camel hair and held together with a piece of leather for a belt.

And he had a pretty weird diet: Locusts and wild honey.

Now the honey might sound better than the locusts – but the honey was probably covered with bees. Remember this is “wild” honey – not something you get in the Supermarket.

This guy is *IN* the wild - which brings me to another thing.

He chose a pretty weird location for himself – out in a desert.

John the Baptist is trying to get a message across to the most people he can, but instead of going to where people are, he goes to the most out-of-the-way spot – so that people have to go out of *their* way just to find him.

Weird, weird, weird...

Yet somehow people go out to see him. Amazing...

And what happens when they get to him?

Imagine we were with John to give him some advice before he opens his mouth...

*“Let's be careful here, John.*

*There's a good crowd here.*

*Try and say something that will appeal to them.*

*Give them a good welcome and thank them for making the effort to come out here.  
Maybe start with a wee joke.  
Try and say something helpful.  
Try and make them feel glad that they have made the trip..."*

Then John stands up and opens with the welcoming words, *"You snakes! Do you think you will escape God's punishment?!!"*

This is the opening line!!! The message is total slagging, criticism, and abuse!  
His message is so offensive.

We would say *"Are you nuts? This is not going to work, John. You must be crazy"*.

And then we come to the weirdest thing of all. People respond in droves!

They don't just come out for a laugh, or consider him some kind of entertaining freak.

Or, lets get real....

I am sure that there were *some* who dismissed him or laughed at him, and there were those who were not ready to hear his message and change their ways, but there were plenty who really wanted to respond.

They actually line themselves up to get baptised.

Despite all the strangeness – there is something about this message that rings true. Somehow this unusual (wild man of Borneo) guy seems to speak with authority.

John the Baptist is getting people ready for the one he believes God has sent to change the world.

The one we know as Jesus.

Not the wee bundle in the manger story - but the adult man - getting ready to begin his ministry.

And of course as we get ready to welcome Jesus at Christmas time once more it's not just a baby we think about either– it's the man he became – it's the whole significance of who this baby was and what he tried to do and bring the world.

Jesus brought comfort and challenge. And if the baby story makes us think 'comfort', John the Baptist certainly reminds us of 'challenge'.

In Luke's version of the preaching of John (Luke 3:7-14) he gives some examples of challenges John made to different people.

To the religious types he said, *"Don't think that just being in a religious family or being a regular at Temple worship exempts you from treating your neighbours with love and respect and compassion."*

To tax collectors he said, *"Make sure you do not take an extra cut from your customers to line your own pocket."*

To many people he said, *“You need to learn to share. If you have more than you need, share with those who have less.”*

To some soldiers he said, *“Don’t use your position of authority to bully the people around you. Treat everyone with respect. Don’t complain about your pay – you are paid better than most.”*

To different types of people, John made different challenges.

If we are going to be ready for God; if we’re going to be ready to respond to God, there are challenges for us to address.

Jesus wants us to know the comfort of God’s love.  
But he too wants to challenge us to be the people God wants us to be.

And that challenge will involve change for each one of us.  
We each have our own issues to face and things to put behind us if we are to be the people God is calling us to be.

## **Scene Two**

The second scene is found at Matthew 11:2-11

In our second scene today things are well different for John.  
He’s in the jail.

He’s stood up and spoken out against the authorities once too often – in this case he has reprimanded King Herod publicly for his violence and lack of morals and now Herod has got him locked away in a prison.

Now John’s got plenty on his mind.  
And he asks his friends to speak to Jesus, so he can be reassured that Jesus is “the one” after all.

Why did he do that?

Firstly, he and Jesus were pretty different.

Jesus didn’t wear weird clothes, eat mad food and hide out in the desert.  
Jesus didn’t go about shouting at people and giving them a hard time.  
Jesus wasn’t into zapping people and scolding them.  
He was different altogether.

John was the kind of guy that spoke about taking up axes and chopping down trees and burning wood that doesn’t bear fruit, so I guess he was hoping for that kind of stuff from Jesus.  
Isn’t Jesus the king?

Well, shouldn't he be taking over the country and driving the Romans out?  
Secondly, I guess John just wanted reassurance that his work and life hadn't been all a big mistake.

Sitting in a prison cell gives plenty of time to think about life and what matters.

So reassurance was what he wanted. Was Jesus really the one from God?

So he gets the reply.

*Look around you, John, and think about it. Look at what is happening wherever Jesus goes. What do you think?*

There is good news delivered to the poor,  
healings,  
new teaching about God,  
hope for the weary,  
encouragement for the oppressed,  
acceptance for the outcasts –  
lives are being changed wherever Jesus goes.

It might be early days yet, and small scale, but Jesus is turning the world upside down.

And of course of particular comfort to John at this time is the news that Jesus brings that nothing that happens to us can ever cut us off from God's care and protection. Death itself cannot finally defeat us.

But why did Jesus send back *this* answer?

Why didn't Jesus just say a simple "Yes"?  
That would just have settled it.

Or would it?

The fact is that when **we** decide that Jesus is the one for us it's not really because someone says some words like "*Jesus is God's Son*".

Being told these facts (even if they are true – even if they **are** facts), is not why we respond to Jesus.

It's by our learning and thinking about Jesus,  
hearing about what he did and said,  
seeing how he treated people, how he behaved towards them,  
discovering the things that motivated him,  
uncovering the dream that inspired him,  
and the new set of values and lifestyle Jesus brought –  
these are the things that make us want to respond.

These are the kind of things that help us decide that this is the person we should follow.

The more we look at Jesus and the more we learn of him,  
the more we understand about Jesus and reflect on him,  
the more we realise:  
that this man knows how to live,  
that this man knows what God is like,  
that this man is greater than anyone else.

We don't know what John the Baptist thought when he got given that reply.  
His response is not recorded.

Hopefully the more he thought about what Jesus was doing, the more he realised  
that this was God at work, and he came to the conclusion that he had been right  
first time about Jesus.

Its as we see for ourselves who Jesus was - and is,  
that we eventually realise what matters:  
that he is worth paying attention to,  
that he is the one we should follow,  
that he is the one that leads us to God.

Matthew 3:1-12

Matthew 11:2-11

December 4 2016 (Advent 2)