

John the Baptist Appears

Every year, at this time, in the lead up to Christmas,
We have to put our protective clothing on and get ready to meet John the Baptist.

If you want the cosiness of the stable (I fully realise the irony in even suggesting that a stable is cosy), but if you want the magic of the stable, you better first hang out with firebrand John.

In fact I don't want to make him sound like a mad nomad
Because even that dismisses him
Makes him sound quaint, like an attraction, like something entertaining about his desert,
camel hair eating vibe.

In Belfast there was a burger van where the guy behind the counter was famously hostile and grumpy. As you stood there waiting for the burger to be cooked, if you happened to catch his eye, he would say "What are you looking at?" And some friends of mine used to go to enjoy the spectacle.

I think John would look you in the eye,
If you looked to chirpy
And I think he might well say "What are you looking at?"

But he would then expect you to come up with the answer,
He would deep within
Because he believed that what goes on in there,
And what comes out of here really matters.

Although John seems utterly scary
He is curiously democratic
Because he seems to believe that everyone can be changed
Everyone can come out to him
Even the ones who says "What are you looking at?"
Or similarly threatening words.

I spoke to someone on Wednesday night, who operates in the hospitality industry. He said to me that I didn't like being held to conformity and rules, because "in business, I'm

a disrupter". Immediately I was thinking "you idiot", people who go round announcing themselves a disrupter, it just doesn't sound genuine.

But I got talking to him, he told me that he always disrupts things, and he said to "I'm hard, I am hard" but he said "I believe that anyone can do anything, you've got to believe in them". And then he listed to me all the people who had worked with him and had gone on to great things in hospitality industry. He genuinely did believe in his people, but he was hard. He doesn't just believe in serving them a burger, he wants to change them.

Maybe you can't work with that guy for the whole of your career, but perhaps you need to spend some of your career with him.

Because the guys that leave you alone
Also don't believe that you can change.

So John comes into the desert with his camel hair,
And his first words are
"The kingdom of God is near, change your mind"
Sometimes this is repent,
But really it is "change your mindset"

God is here, present, demanding, aching, calling out, believing that we can change
Believing that the patterns can be addressed
He is a disruptor.

Brennan Manning once asked
How can you hold the Niagara Falls in a teacup
That's what it's like
Trying to get your head round the idea that the kingdom of God is near.

You sense that presence,
You sense your presence in the presence of it,
And then you go to change,
You go the disrupter, and you get changed.

When the people go into the water,
People from all over

From Jerusalem
From the regions around the Jordan
They all call out their sins.

Now I want to say what this isn't before I say what it is
I do not believe that our sins are forgiven by being able to remember them all
And if you can get them all blurted out
Then they will each get ticked off the list
Like some great memory test.

It's not like that.

Nor is the act of confession like some great act of flagellation
Then we can convince God how sincere we are
And if we look sorry enough
Then we will be forgiven enough.

It's not that.

Rather what it is is that when we catch a glimpse even of the Niagara Falls in a teacup
A sense that the kingdom of God is near
That God is near, in all power and love
Summoning us to follow
When we get a glimpse of that
When we sense the glory
We sense our smallness
We sense that we need to let go of our sin
That we no longer wanting us to be held back by it
We want rid of anything that keeps us from him
And it is not of him.

That is the introduction that John makes.

Duncan Campbell, the evangelist and minister who was much used during the Lewis revival tells the story of conviction coming upon the congregation in Barvas in Lewis.

This revival began with prayer, and with an implicit confidence in God - this sounds like "the kingdom of God is near". And then he would talk about the prayer that would come

upon a gathering in the Church, as people would pray in expectation, and then a sense of the awesomeness of God, the congregation is moved by a power that they cannot resist, come into the Church, and a wave of conviction of sin sweeps over the congregation, they cry to God for mercy, but then they stay in the presence, they want to stay here, and they are filled with great sense of God.

In one paragraph, Campbell talks of the people being moved in "sorrow and distress" and with "joy and love" filling their hearts. It is the two together. This sense of being utterly drawn into the presence of God.

It is this great sense of God that we pray for,
And we must meet in revival power,
And John is part of this.

He then turns to the Pharisees and Sadducees, and he is a disrupter, so he turns to them, because he knows that for them this can only be a spectacle, but they need utterly changed, because their own religion has become about power.

"You brood of vipers, who told you to flee from the wrath to come"

As Matthew read this, people knew what this wrath was, because the might of Rome had indeed come upon them, and all the Pharisees and Sadducees' certainties had been swept away, but back in John's time they did not know this.

He calls them vipers,
He asks them who warned them to flee
Not because he doesn't want them to be saved
But because without this language they will be like those who spot which way the crowd is going, run to the front of it and shout "Follow me".

They will hijack this movement for their own ends.
And he tells them that they can be gone and replaced
They are not essential
God can raise up disciples for himself from these stones.

What is their great enemy?
It is complacency... it is this mantra that we are Abrahams' children.

But what is going to change them

A sense of the glory - which is not the same as their power and their institutions.

They have come for their entertainment - like those guys outside the burger van.

They need to come to be changed.

And going to change them is attention to fruit

Where can the life of God flow through me.

Are they ready to confess all of their sins.

I read an interview with Mandu Reid, who is the leader of the Women's Equality party, and was present in the conversation between Sarah Hussey and Ngoni Fulani, which led to Sarah Hussey resigning.

She was quite disappointed in the resignation, not because she didn't think the conversation was disturbing, but because she says that institutions always have a "bad apple" excuse when it comes to racism. Rather than facing up to the problem which we all have, they instead find someone who is very bad, get rid of them, and then everyone else can move on. Rather than having to face up to our role in privilege, empire, and yes racism. Blame one person and then we all move on.

The Pharisees and Sadducees were reluctant to go into the deep change, and as a result they are going to be gone. Deep change, deep transformation, is what we need, otherwise the institution does not deserve to survive. If we do not produce fruit, we cannot claim a future, and God will raise up a generation for elsewhere.

So once again we have to look at our fruit, how are we sharing, and being present to others, how are we letting others know - in the ways that are right for the particular relationships which we are in - how heaven is near, and that we are summoned to change, an orientation towards the presence and work of God, and the idea that all of us, all of us, can be changed.

On a couple of Sunday's now, Franny, Liam, Sam and myself have been hosting a curry and then pizza evening for some of the guys from the area - guys in their mid 20s and 30s. And they talk about their lives, and they talk about their mistakes, and they talk about their anger - with a reality and a passion and lack of diplomacy or politeness. Whereas I stay quiet and silent, because I have to keep up the story that I am the one who has this sorted, and you need to be a little more like me.

Perhaps I need to be a little bit more like them. They would have no problem standing in the Jordan river confessing their sins. I would - the loss of dignity would be terrible.

But that is where the warning comes in?

So where is the complacency for you?

Where is the thing of which you are most proud?

Or feel most entitled?

I think John is urging us to get changed

He is giving ourselves to it

Because he believes that when the kingdom of God comes near

You can be utterly different, utterly changed

And there is nothing he will not say or do to confront that

And the question is

Will we let him

Will we let him disrupt us

Look at that thing, and get rid of the hold that it has upon you.

And then get ready for Christ...

Now I have to confess that this is not the most inviting of my pictures of Christ

With the winnowing fork in his hand

This is a Christ who is going to throw the chaff into the fire

What if I am fire bound.

The wheat in the granary which is that which bears fruit

That which has seeds to it

That which has life

And that which is seedless

That which has cut itself off from life

Will be thrown away.

This is the kind of language that must shock us into believing
Not that the fire is an inevitability
No - that we can be changed

This is not the only thing we learn about Jesus
And like John he will call out the people that surprise us
And make friends with the people, and the parts of ourselves that would surprise us
But at the moment,
Let us get ready for this man here
Winnowing fork Jesus
He is the one this Sunday who gets us ready for Christmas.

So call out for the sense of God, and the kingdom of God to be near, to know it near
Confess your sins, where you have fallen short of glory
Even if you have to do it in a river,

Deal with your complacency, with that which is in you
Which says I am doing well thank you
Well done me
Deal with that part of things.

And then get ready for Christ,
Who seeks fruit
The ultimate disrupter
Who believes the all of us can change
And demands that we do

That is how we get ready for Christmas.

AMEN