

St John & St Stephen's Church, Orts Road, Reading, 11th December 2022, Advent 3
Isaiah 35:1-10, Matthew 11:2-11

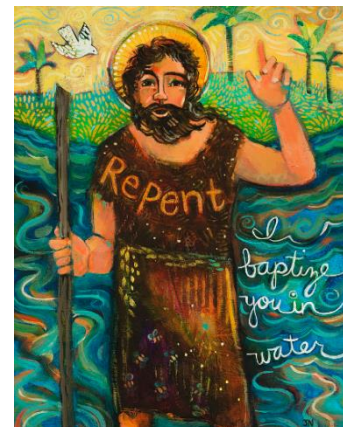
What is John the Baptist saying to you?

Curiously, the readings in Advent refer twice to the man known as John the Baptist. Christine spoke about him last week, referencing the book of Isaiah: *a voice crying in the wilderness, prepare a way for the Lord*. In our gospel for today, Jesus asks the crowds who went out to see John, 'What did you go out into the wilderness to look at?' (Matthew 11:7). I want to literally *look at* John this morning, and in the looking, try to hear, to discern what he is saying to you and me. I'm going to use four quite different images created by different artists to try and bring him to life a bit, literally give him some colour. As we look at the images together and reflect on them, try and be conscious of what's going on inside you. Does the image, or what's said about it and this moment in John's life touch you at all? Is there any movement within you? Does a 'penny drop' or do you realise something you've not seen before? A lightbulb moment even? If so, hang on to that. There may be a message for you, or an invitation. God is always present, always wanting more for us, always beckoning. Visual images can sometimes get through our barriers and speak to us in a way that words cannot.



The first image is of a plaster cast statue that I encountered last year at St Beuno's retreat centre in Wales. I used the word 'encountered' because it felt like a meeting between me and the statue. It shows two female bodies intertwined with two figures of children dancing in a shared space between them. The women are Mary, mother of Jesus, and Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist. The children are Jesus and John, dancing in a shared womb. It is a representation of what is called the Visitation, when Mary, pregnant by the Holy Spirit with Jesus, goes to visit her relative Elizabeth, 6 months pregnant with John. In his gospel, Luke tells us that as they meet, Elizabeth is filled with the Spirit herself and says, 'as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy' (Luke 1:44). Mary responds with what is sometimes called the *Magnificat*, a song of praise that starts with the words, 'My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour' (Lk 1:46-55). So here we have John, still in his mother's womb, leaping for joy as he senses the presence of Jesus, his cousin, and these two begin their intertwined, overlapping lives even before they are born. This statue, full of joy, awe, praise and human bodies – two female, two male, almost called out to me when I saw it for the first time and stayed with me during my retreat. I kept coming back to it, sitting in front of it. It spoke to me most deeply, simply of joy, embodied joy, of responsiveness to God. I wonder if this touches you? Can you recall a time when something, someone, God even, deeply moved you to joy, perhaps even to tears? Was there an invitation in that for you?

The second image is a modern representation of John in full preacher mode! It's painted by Jen Norton, an American Catholic artist, who writes of her art: 'For me, painting is a form of prayer that helps reveal my mission as a Christian woman and the power of the Holy Spirit.' Here is John dressed in simple garments, bearded, finger raised in rebuke: 'Repent!' he cries, 'Turn your life around!' 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?' (Lk3:7). A message of judgement, of coming wrath, of the necessity of a change of life. However, he points forward to One who will come after him:



who will not baptise with water, as he does, but with the Spirit and with fire. His mission and his message is linked to that of his cousin Jesus, whom he first met while still in the womb and experienced the joy of his presence. This is John clearing the ground for Jesus, calling people to a change of life. I wonder if this speaks to you as we begin the church's year in Advent? Is there anything that you or I need to clear out of the way to welcome the Christ in?

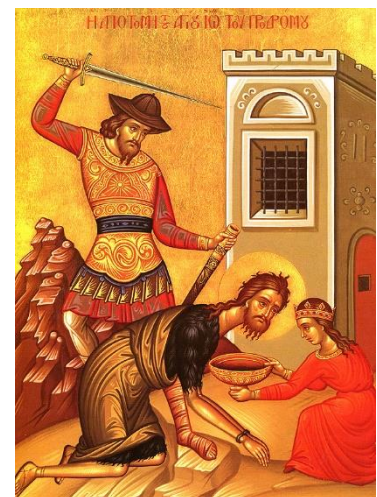


The third image is this beautiful painting by Piero della Francesca from about 1440. You can see the original in the National Gallery in London. Here we see John baptising Jesus by pouring water on his head. Perhaps this is more like John the Anglican than John the Baptist! Jesus, the stoup of water and the dove, representing the Holy Spirit, and the body of Jesus are all in a straight vertical line which is itself dead centre in the picture. That is to emphasise the *centrality* of what is happening here and perhaps to connect heaven and earth. Have you noticed the angel on the left of the picture, standing casually by? And the guy in the background on the right, taking his clothes off for a dip, unaware of what is happening? From the sublime to the ridiculous! Something about the divine, the sacred, taking place in the middle of ordinariness and normal life. So what is happening here? It is the moment

when Jesus receives the fullness of the Spirit and he hears the Father's affirmation: *'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased'* (Matthew 3:17). It is the beginning of his public ministry, the moment when he takes over from John. John said of this change of roles, *'He must increase, but I must decrease'* (John 3:30). I wonder how this speaks to you and me? Is there an invitation here for a new start, and new sense of purpose? A need, perhaps, to hear the Father's voice of love – *you are my beloved?* Or a message perhaps that I need, you need, to get out of the way, to decrease so that that Christ in us can increase?

The final image is an icon, the icon of the beheading of John the Baptist. In the Orthodox tradition, icons are like windows. We are invited to see *through* them to perceive the divine. The story of John the Baptist's end is a sad, even pointless one. John, never one to mince his words, had rebuked Herod for marrying Herodias, the ex-wife of his brother Philip. Herodias demands his execution, but Herod, who *"liked to listen"* to John, is reluctant to do so because he fears him, knowing he is a *"righteous and holy man"*.

The story tells how Herodias's daughter (traditionally Salome) dances before Herod, who is pleased (bit of an understatement) and offers her anything she asks for in return. When the girl asks her mother what she should request, her mother tells her to demand the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Reluctantly, Herod orders the beheading of John, and his head is delivered to her, as requested. John's disciples take the body away and bury it in a tomb (Mark 6:17-29). The icon shows John just about to be beheaded, with Salome holding the platter ready to receive his head. The perhaps unexpectedly rich red colours for such a grisly scene





are of course about the blood that is about to be shed. Let's look a little closer. Look at John's and Salome's eyes. John is looking directly at Salome with compassion and perhaps forgiveness. Salome can't even look at John. I wonder what she is feeling at that moment? John's expression reminds us of Jesus as he was crucified: *'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing'*. (Luke 23:24) This last cameo of John's life speaks of the cost of being prepared to do and say what is unpopular. To respond to the call. How does this speak to you and me?

We have followed the story of John the Baptist from the baby in the womb meeting Jesus in another womb; to the fiery preacher with a message of repentance, preparation for the One to come; to the baptism of his cousin, Jesus, at the peak of his ministry, when he begins to decrease; to his senseless death, victim of spite. In the last image, the icon, the artist (or iconographer) has painted in an image of compassion in John's expression in the face of death, and of an unwillingness to face her victim in Salome's.

John was a man who spoke out the truth, as did his cousin, Jesus. He spoke it out, *'come what may'*, apparently not too concerned with the consequences. I wonder how he is speaking to us? As we have considered these four vignettes from his life, and looked at the images which four different artists have created as *they* have reflected on his life, what stands out?

I'm going to leave it there. I don't have a 'message'. Just a question. How is John speaking to you?

Richard Croft