

DATE: Wednesday December 1

CHURCH: St Matthew's Kensington

BIBLE PASSAGE: Luke 3:-6

GENERAL THEME/TOPIC: John The Baptist

Some people are very well known because of their distinctive way of dressing. The music guru Molly Meldrum is known for that hat that he always wears. The caricature of a London male who works "in the City" has him wearing a pin-striped suit, bowler hat and tightly furled umbrella. John the Baptist was known because of his distinctive, almost "Middle-Eastern hippy" clothes made from camel hair and his leather belt (Matthew 3:4-5). John the Baptist was also known because his name "John" was really most unusual. By social convention he should have been named Zechariah after his father; but divine instruction saw him given the name "John." John the Baptist was known for his fiery preaching, and for his denunciation of the current ruler and his illegal marriage.

For us, John the Baptist is best known as Jesus' cousin-of-sorts, and as the man who prepared the way of the Lord, as our Gospel Reading told us this morning.

John the Baptist was a baptiser. Now that was odd. The Jews, when they were convicted of wrongdoing, went to the temple and offered a sacrifice ... a sin-offering. That was laid down in the Old Testament book called Leviticus. But John didn't advocate that. He *baptised* people. Where did that come from? Was it a special ceremony that John the Baptist had devised? Well, no. There's a theory that John was a member of a group called the Essenes. This was a religious group of men who lived in the desert, and who meticulously observed the Law of Moses. They were strict about observing the Sabbath. They took on poverty voluntarily, and they were celibate. Every morning they went through a ritual washing in a specially built pool. After that they prayed together and then ate together. It is believed that John the Baptist's baptism was a version of this daily, morning ritual washing practised by the Essenes – and was an experiential cleansing of all that had gone before. When he blew in from the desert like a rushing desert wind, and when he preached his fiery, pointed sermons, and when people wanted to give an outward demonstration of their change of life and their taking on a new lease of religious observance, they went through this baptism that John brought with him from the Judean mulga.

It was for sure that John made a huge impression. He had a ring of disciples who followed him, who learned from what he did and said. One of his disciples was a man named Andrew, a fisherman (John 1:35-40).

The huge impression John the Baptist made was because he was an Essene who had *come to town* – and the Essenes rarely came to town. The huge impression he made was because of his appearance and his wild clothing. But that was the same clothing that Elijah had worn (2 Kings 1:8) – this wild looking man was a sort of Elijah. And the huge impression he made was because of his desert diet ... locusts and wild honey (Mark 1:6).

Our gospel reading said this about John the Baptist – "He went into all the region about the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." (Luke 3:3). But what did John say about himself? We need to turn to another gospel to find that. In Matthew 3 it is record that John said, "I baptise you with water, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandal I am not worthy to carry. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." (Matthew 3:11). John knew that his job was not to attract followers to himself. His job was to get people ready for the mightier one whom God would send – and that was to be Jesus Christ.

Advent is the season of getting ready for the mightier one who is to come. Oh it's true that Jesus' first coming was in weakness and in humanness – a mere baby born into poverty – a human expression of the

immense divinity of God – at Christmas God emptied himself, and took on the form of a servant, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:7ff). All the celebrations of Christmas are about the humility of God – God coming among us. And so we make vast and wonderful preparations for the annual remembrance of this unbelievably huge humility of God. God became like us. Try to get that into perspective. We can't really ... but we can see and celebrate the Christ child, and the angels, and the shepherds. We can understand ***those things*** and we do well to celebrate it with all the verve and joy we can.

Advent is the season of getting ready for the mightier one who is to come. And it's true that his second coming will be in glory and in grace. And we are the Johns the Baptists for our world, for our community, for our family. We are those who are now preparing the way of the Lord – and as John did, we do that by the words we speak and the things we do. Because we have seen and experienced the glory and the love of God in our lives, we seek to show that glory and that love to others. Of course we will not be perfect as we do this ... of course we will let our guards down and speak and act in ways that are less than we expect of ourselves as people of God; as we are as consistent as we can be in living and speaking for God and God's standards ... that people will see God in us, and be attracted to that godly way of life.

So ... Advent ... getting ready for God ... getting ourselves ready for God ... getting our world ready for God. It's a huge task, and in our own strength it is beyond us. But as we appropriate the power and grace of the Holy Spirit, then in our small part of the world – in our homes and in our street – we can there get ready for God. Let's not be so overcome by the hugeness of the large-scale task, that we don't take on the do-ability of the small-scale task and let us get ready for God, as John the Baptist did. (1069)