

Sermon: John the Baptist

Cashmere, Sunday 13 January 2019

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Bible Readings

Isaiah 40:3-9

Luke 3: 2-8 and 15-22

Spirit of God, breathe in our breathing, speak through our words and whisper in the silence, through Christ the living Word. Amen.

I am writing a reference this week for Zeus. You probably did not know that 4 year olds need references! His family are applying for Zeus to go one of the Christian schools in town and – I guess it's a good thing but it's also a bad thing when you are trying to get in – but our Christian schools are in high demand in Christchurch and they all have waiting lists and complicated enrolment processes. So I am writing Zeus a reference. And I hope and pray that he is accepted. Because he turns 5 this year. Very exciting.

I wonder when you have needed a reference. And when you have been a referee for someone else.

You might remember – I know Alan Simson does – one Ron Townsend from Feilding came to visit Cashmere at the stage when the name of Silvia Purdie was starting to be considered for the ministry vacancy here, and I am told that Ron sung my praises and told you all how wonderful I am. So much so that when the interview group actually met me in person I think they were a bit disappointed!

I have also had an experience of someone I had asked to be a referee for me telling the interview panel that they actually didn't think I was really all that suitable – which they had not told me! – which is part of the reason why I am not a Methodist minister. Probably just as well in the end, but it was quite hurtful at the time.

It's quite a thing especially for young people to find people who will speak well of them to potential employers; my sons are at that stage in life, putting together CVs, getting some good references.

It's an important thing in life – who will vouch for you? Who will you vouch for? Who will speak for you, stick up for you, endorse you?

In all four gospels, John the Baptist plays this role for Jesus. John acts as referee for Jesus. Before we meet Jesus the man, in all 4 gospels, we first meet John, and John tells us about the one who is coming. John who was at the time a great prophet and leader, raised the hopes of Israel that now is the time, the Messiah is coming. John spoke of himself decreasing so that Jesus would increase. John pointed ahead of himself, beyond his own baptism of water to another who would baptise with fire.

I find John such a fascinating character. I used to pretty much ignore him I'm afraid, skim over the bits about him in the gospels like you would a preface in a book – lets get started on the main story! But this morning, I guess for the only time this year, let's pause and focus on this man and what he might have to say to us this morning, for 2019.

Luke tells us that John and Jesus were 2nd cousins, once removed, or something like that. Cousins anyway. John's mother Elizabeth and Jesus's mother Mary were relatives. Their family was one of the important priestly families. The men of that family trained as priests and took their turn on the roster in the Jerusalem temple. Perhaps Elizabeth was Mary's aunt, maybe Mary's mother had been Elizabeth's sister, something like that anyway. and had moved north from Jerusalem to live in Nazareth in Galilee. So, when Mary's family had come to Temple for feasts and celebrations they would have seen Elizabeth and the

rest of the family, maybe stayed at their place, and John and Jesus would have played together as boys and gone to class together to learn Hebrew and Torah. By the time they were 12 they would both have fully memorised the Old Testament. All of it. Every word.

But Jesus would go home to Nazareth and help his Mum with the young ones and help his Dad with the carpentry business. While John stayed at school, studying and studying, beyond what Jesus did, studying to become a priest in his father's footsteps. His parents were elderly and they died.

Then something happened. Something flipped inside him. The Bible does not tell us what. But one day John walked out. Left home, left school, left the Temple, left Jerusalem, just left. He abandoned the position he inherited from his father, and literally headed for the hills, out into the desert. He lived for a while in a desert community, he lived for a while alone. He became a wild man, a God man. He never again wore the long robes and tassled gowns of the temple, choosing to wear only what he could find in the wild places. eating only what he could find. He must have looked quite a sight, wrapped in a rough camel skin, thin as a rake, hair long and matted, eating locusts and wild honey. Goodness me. Hardly sounds like a good role model.

The gospels tell us that the word of God came to him in the wilderness. His hunger for God that had propelled him out away from home was filled with the very word of God. All that scripture that saturated him from all those years of study burned in new ways in his soul. And his time away from civilization made him see everything with new eyes. Then something else happened. God's word became his words. He began to preach. And when he spoke people listened. He was totally unlike the well combed teachers in the synagogues and in Temple courts, with their careful words, well considered and balanced points of theological hair-splitting arguments. When John preached he was fire and passion. He knew the scriptures and he knew God's truth and he applied it to everyday life and he called everyday people to live with integrity. He didn't just hem and haw about the law of God, he made sense of it, and people stood under the light and truth and holiness of God and they felt cut to the heart, convicted to the core of their being. And they came to John and they said 'We want to change. We want to make a new start on life. We want to know God afresh.'

And John would walk with them out into the river and together they would plunge under the water and the people would walk out of the river full of joy, with an incredible lightness of heart, making a new start of life, and knowing God afresh. And so baptism was begun.

And whenever anyone suggested that he, John, was the Messiah, the one who would save Israel, he would laugh and shake his head vigorously and say 'No way! It's not me! I'm only setting the scene for him. I'm only his referee. He's coming. Keep looking.'

Then one day John recognised his cousin Jesus in the crowd. Matthew's gospel has them having an argument about whether John should baptise Jesus or visa versa, but the other 3 gospels say that John baptised Jesus just like everyone else. All 4 gospels agree that something extraordinary happened in the moment when Jesus stood up out of the water, and this was a bombshell moment for John. It was like a dove swooping down on his head. John saw it, he felt it, and John recognised it as the Holy Spirit, and John knew that this was the One. This was the man whom Israel had been waiting for. This was the Messiah, the Son of God. Jesus, his cousin. Wow. Quite a day, for both of them.

So. I wonder what John has to say to us this morning. I suspect it would be to encourage us to speak about God. Last week I talked about the importance of reading, and reading about God. This week I want to talk about the importance of talking about God.

I don't call myself an evangelical and you won't hear me talking a great deal about evangelism, but this morning that is where I am heading. Evangelism is sharing God's Good News with our words. It is talking about our faith with people who do not share our faith. It is difficult. It makes us uncomfortable.

I have been to seminars and workshops and read books and done trainings about evangelism and I have failed every one to put it into practice in the way I was taught. But it cannot just go in the 'too hard basket'. It is not OK for us as people of faith to stay silent about our faith. I do want to challenge you to find ways of talking about Jesus that are genuine and authentic to you and your story. I am always looking for ways of talking about Jesus that feel genuine and authentic to who I am. And I look to John the Baptist for help with this.

We need some of his Attitude with a capital A. We try too hard to fit in, to wear the right clothes and eat the right food. And there is John the wild man of God who tells it like it is and connects with people.

And there is John the Baptist pointing beyond himself, pointing to Jesus. I like that. I can do that. I want to say with my life and with my words, thanks, yeah OK, I do my best but actually, anything that is worth anything about me comes from Jesus. I want to tell people about Jesus and I want to introduce people to Jesus if they haven't met him yet. I want my life and my words to be a referee for Jesus. He is the One who is worth knowing and worth following and serving and praising. Not me.

Find ways of talking about Jesus that are genuine and authentic to you, who you are, what you really do believe, what matters to you, what you are grateful for, what you want other people to hear about God through your words and your life. Give it a try this week. Let me know how you get on.