

“FOLLOWING THE KING - 6”
Matthew 3:1-12

As we continue our journey through Matthew’s Gospel this morning, we’re going to take the reading we’ve just had as a starting point for looking at the man who was really the last of the prophets, the one who was so close to Jesus that he could actually say “*Behold the Lamb of God*” and point to him. If you were listening to that reading a few moments ago, you’ll have sussed out that we are talking about John the Baptist. It was his mission to point men and women to Jesus, to pave the way for the Kingly Messiah, to prepare folks for the message that Jesus had come to proclaim himself.

There’s no doubt that John was one of the great figures of the **New** Testament – Jesus himself makes that point in *Matthew 11:11* – even though, as with so many other characters there’s not a great deal of information given about his life. But he also stands in the tradition of the great **Old** Testament figures, too. He bridges the gap as the only real “prophet” of the New Testament, calling people to repentance as Isaiah, Jeremiah and Malachi did, but with the added advantage of actually being able to point to Jesus.

His fame was fairly widespread and he is mentioned by several other non-biblical writers, such as the Jewish historian Josephus, who themselves recognised him as a prophet, a disturber of people’s consciences. So let’s have a closer look at him together. As we’ve said, there’s not a great deal about John’s life and character in the Gospels: what we do read about, though, are his birth, his lifestyle, his faith and his message. And they all have something to say to us still today.

1. HIS BIRTH WAS UNUSUAL

When I was a teacher, parents’ evenings used to fascinate me. Sometimes you’d be faced with a woman you assumed to be the older sister of the pupil in question, who’d been sent along because mum worked nights. Part way through the conversation it would become obvious that this was, in fact, the mum herself. The majority of parents were more or less as you’d expect them to be, and then, at the other end of the spectrum, there were the couples who were so old you thought they must be the grandparents. I’m sure the teachers at Jerusalem High School or whatever would have had a bit of a shock when Zechariah and Elizabeth shuffled in to have a look at young John’s work! *Luke 1:7* tells us that not only was Elizabeth barren, but “*they were both well on in years.*” That Greek word - *πρεβηκοτες* - is the same word we find in *Luke 2:36* referring to Anna: and look how old she was – at least 84! This isn’t just a question of being over 30 – as we were when Erik was born and we were referred to by the hospital as elderly parents: Sally even had the word “geriatric” on her medical records.

Luke’s account of the events surrounding the birth of John the Baptist shows that it was a very unusual event. Not only did an elderly couple – the wife of which was barren anyway – manage to conceive a child (can you imagine the ante-natal classes?), but the father was struck dumb for nine months. That was a bit of a handicap for a priest, but it seemed to be a sure-fire way of dispelling any doubts about whether the wife was pregnant. It would save all the gossip and speculation in the early months, wouldn’t it? – “Is she putting on weight again, or is it another baby?” “Must be a baby: the father’s been struck dumb.” There were also angels involved in it all.

And the angel tells Zechariah what John’s task is to be. He is to be a prophet – “*in the spirit and power of Elijah*” (*Luke 1:17*) – and to prepare people for the Lord. When God has a job to be done, he ensures that everything works together as he wants. Nothing stands in the way – not even things that seem to be biologically impossible. John’s birth was unusual, but God was certainly in control. Maybe in your life things don’t seem to be going as you’d like them to; maybe you are facing seemingly insurmountable obstacles. God’s in control. As the angel told Elizabeth’s relative, Mary, while foretelling another strange birth, “*nothing is impossible for God*” (*Luke 1:37*).

It may even be that God seems to be calling you to do something special for him, there's some task you really feel deep down that God wants you to accomplish for him – but you know that you don't have the resources to be able to do it. Perhaps you feel you don't have the gifts – perhaps you don't have the guts to do it. That's never stopped God in the past. Moses told God he wasn't very good with words; Isaiah told God he was too sinful, Jeremiah that he was too young, Amos that he was just a simple goatherd, Jonah simply ran away. But God gave them the strength and the ability to do what he wanted. If God calls you to do something, he won't let his plans be frustrated by your apparent inadequacy. Look at what he said to Moses in *Exodus 4:11* – “I made your mouth and it worked pretty well to start with.” God made you for a purpose and he'll fulfil that purpose even if it seems totally impossible through human eyes. That's what the Holy spirit is all about.

2. HIS LIFESTYLE WAS UNORTHODOX

We don't know if John's parents died while he was still young, or whether he found the age difference just too much to bear, but we read in *Luke 1:80* that “*he lived in the desert*”. While he was there, though, he heard God's call to go off preaching (*Luke 3:2*). Now, he must have been a fairly strange sight, what we might call today a “local character” – like the man who used to stand at the traffic lights on the A10 in Edmonton on Saturdays. The reading we had earlier on gives us a flavour of his lifestyle. *Mark 1:6* describes his clothing as “*made of camel's hair*” – not terribly attractive and probably remarkably smelly (a bit like those Afghan coats hippies used to wear). It's certainly not the elegant kind of camel coat people wear today, but it was probably all he could find out in the desert and no doubt itched like anything. His diet doesn't seem much better – “*locusts and wild honey*”. Even if we accept the possibility of translating “*locusts*” as “*locust beans*”, it doesn't sound much more appetising, does it?

No doubt this all contributed to his appearance as a prophet – just as today you can identify those who think they are great men of God by their snappy dress. (Unless, of course, they're youth experts, when “snappy” is clearly not the word you'd use!) There's a kind of “in” look amongst the speakers at Spring Harvest and similar gatherings each year, and I often wonder if they get together beforehand to discuss their clothing. This wild-looking figure, striding out of the heat haze in his rather unusual clothing, picking bits of locust shell out of his teeth and shouting “Repent!” would certainly have had an effect on the locals – especially as anyone who showed any interest was promptly thrown in the river.

But his lifestyle wasn't unorthodox because he was psychologically unhinged or trying to make a point. It was because of his single-minded desire to do what God had called him to do. He was like St Paul, who tells us in his letters to the Corinthians that everything he did was subordinated to his desire to preach about Jesus Christ. Look, just as an example, at *1 Corinthians 1:17; 2:2; 2 Corinthians 4:5*. For many Christians today, though, doing what God wants us to do comes well down the list after making sure that we're wearing the right clothes, living in the right house and making the right sort of money.

Yes, it may seem strange to others that you forego your lunch once a week so that you can spend time in prayer: it may be a little unorthodox that you buy all your clothes at the charity shop (anyone who's interested can see me for tips on which are the best for what) – but it's what God has asked you to do. You are able to free up time, money, resources for the things that are a priority in the Kingdom of God. You are responding to his call on your life. Jesus calls his followers – you and me – to act as lights in this world, to be salt in our society. To do that means we are sometimes considered to be a little unorthodox. It's not just because of the things we **don't** do, but because of the things we **do** do. The Christian lifestyle is distinctive (and attractively so) because we've allowed ourselves to be transformed by the power of God's Holy Spirit. One of my favourite bits of the New Testament – although it's the bit I find most challenging – is *Romans 12:1,2*. John made no concessions to the prevailing fashions of his day, so he seemed fairly unorthodox. But he did what God asked of him and relied on him in every way.

3. HIS MESSAGE WAS UNCOMPROMISING

God had called John to a specific task. As we read in *Luke 3:3-6*, he was to call the people to repentance and to declare God's offer of forgiveness for sins in preparation for the coming of Jesus. And John stuck to that message whatever else happened. John faithfully proclaimed the message that God had given him. And he made no concessions to people's sensibilities. Can you imagine standing out in the Market Square or over in Beacon Park on a summer Saturday afternoon and shouting out at passers-by, "*You brood of vipers!*" (*Luke 3:7*)? The whole of that passage shows a real desire to say exactly what God wanted. Sometimes it's easy to say that to a whole crowd of people, because everyone thinks you're talking about someone else, so they don't react to you personally.

But in *Mark 6:17,18*, we read that John was quite prepared to say such things to individuals, without fearing the consequences. In this case it led to his rather bizarre death, a death that was **unpleasant** if you want to continue the alliteration this morning. [It reminds me of one of the old weekly *New Statesman* competitions to imagine great unrecorded sentences from history. The winner was "*Salome, dear: not in the fridge.*"]

We must always be aware that we're not doing anyone any favours if we water down the message of the gospel to suit those around. We may see the need to communicate that message in different ways, but the central truths are unchanging. Speaking the truth of the gospel can sometimes be a bit daunting, especially if the person you're speaking to, like Herod, could make your life very unpleasant indeed. But it's what we're called to do. John the Baptist certainly wasn't out to win friends just for the sake of it – although it seems that Herod liked having him around. He was out to do God's will and nothing was going to get in the way of that.

Are you as single-minded as John when it comes to doing what God wants you to? Are you ready to speak out and live out the things that you read in God's word? It's too late to do anything about your birth, but you can certainly respond faithfully to God's call and be encouraged that nothing will prevent God's working through you if you're really serious about following him. You can make sure that you speak God's message uncompromisingly, even if it does mean that people think you're a bit unorthodox, and it may lead to unpleasant things happening to you. If you do follow God's will, like John the Baptist, you'll be helping men and women to make way for Jesus in their lives.

The encouragement and the motivation for all that come from the One to whom John was pointing, another person whose birth was unusual, whose lifestyle was unorthodox and whose message was even more uncompromising than John's, whose life, ministry and death are the real subject matter of Matthew's Gospel. Jesus Christ gave up far more than you or I would ever be able to dream of, to come into our world, to die for you and for me. As he hung, naked and bleeding on a cross, spread-eagled before a mocking world, he died to show just how much God loves you. He fought and won the decisive battle over the forces of evil – the effects and consequences of your sin and mine. Can you look up at the tortured face and beaten body, and then walk away and say, "No, it's not for me"? Jesus died for you: are you prepared to commit yourself to him and to telling others that he died for them too?

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Questions for discussion

1. In what sense was John the Baptist a prophet? Do we still have prophets around today? How can we identify them?
2. There was no doubt about God's plan for John's life. How do we discern God's plan for our lives today?
3. As followers of Jesus we are called to be distinctive. How can we ensure that we are distinctive? How do we ensure that we don't simply appear weird?
4. John was prepared to tell people that they needed to repent. Can we do that today? If so, how do we do it? If not, why not?
5. Do you admire John or think he was just a bit strange? How would you react to someone behaving like him today? Why?