

John the Baptist

The Story so far

We are now up to part 3 of our story – The life and Ministry of Jesus Christ.

Part 1 was largely based in a stable in Bethlehem as we celebrated the birth on Christmas Day

Part 2 we looked at last week as we celebrated the feast of Epiphany, where we looked at some of the various events that happened just after Jesus' birth, culminating in the visit from those Magi from the East – sometimes known as wise men, sometimes as the three Kings. And there we discovered that what those magi were looking for was a baby who would be not only the King of the Jews, but also, because this is what the Old Testament prophets had told them, would be the King of the Gentiles as well.

Part 3 takes us forward to the start of Jesus' ministry – and yes, to remind you, we have missed out a detailed look at some of those things that happened in Jesus' childhood until we celebrate Candlemas in Foxton in 2 weeks time. Our readings set out for us today are all about the calling of the first disciples, and we will be looking at that later in the service, but if we are not careful we are going to miss out another really important part of the story. And that is the story of John the Baptist.

So – John the Baptist. What do we know about him, who was he, what did he do, and why was he important?

Well first of all his birth was something quite special.

Interviewer: So you are?

Zechariah: I'm Zechariah

Interviewer: And where do you fit into the John the Baptist Story?

Zechariah: He was my son.

Interviewer: So, forgive me as all children I know are wonderful, what was so special about John?

Zechariah: Well, both my wife Elizabeth and I thought we weren't going to be able to have children.

Interviewer: And may I ask why not.

Zechariah: (whispers) we were a bit too old.

Interviewer: Sorry, I didn't quite catch that.

Zechariah: (whispers) we were a bit too old.

Interviewer: (loudly) Oh you were too old.

Zechariah: Don't tell everyone – it's all a bit embarrassing.

Interviewer: Being old isn't embarrassing.

Zechariah: No – what was embarrassing is that God told me that Elizabeth and I were going to have a baby and I didn't believe him. And because of that I couldn't speak from the day God's angel told me about the baby to, after he was born, the day when I named him John.

Interviewer: And so what did you do to make up for this questioning of God?

Day:

Sermon Series

Date:

Zechariah: Well, all I could do was to praise God, and I spoke to people all about what God told me would happen to John. It's now in a prayer that you call the Benedictus.

Interviewer: Oh, I like that. But what about Elizabeth – I know she was your wife and I'm sure she was wonderful, but was there anything special about her?

Zechariah: You mean apart from being old?

Interviewer: Yes, apart from being old.

Zechariah: Well her cousin was Mary, who also had a bit of a surprising arrival.

Interviewer: Ah I see. Well thank you Zechariah.

Zechariah: You are most welcome.

Interviewer: So now I would like you to meet the man himself, John the Baptist. Oh, you could have made an effort, I mean you do look a bit scruffy.

John the Baptist: Oh, but I'm cool man.

Interviewer: No, let's not do that. You seem to be dressed unusually. Is that camel hair? Where have you been?

John the Baptist: I've been out in the wilderness, praying, as I have a really important job to do.

Interviewer: So how did you survive in the wilderness? I mean what did you eat?

John the Baptist: Best not to ask – but can I just mention wild locusts and honey. Mmm

Interviewer: OK – but I wished you hadn't mention them. So what is this really important job you said you have to do?

John the Baptist: I am the promised messenger who's come to tell people that the Messiah is about to arrive.

Interviewer: I see. So was that just telling people, 'Jesus is coming'.

John the Baptist: No, I also encourage people to say sorry for all the things they had done wrong. And to do that I baptised them in the river Jordan.

Interviewer: And what happened when Jesus did come?

John the Baptist: He asked me to baptise him as well. I said that it should be the other way round, but he wouldn't have it.

Interviewer: That must have been quite special.

John the Baptist: And some. When I baptised Jesus it was simply amazing. It looked as if the skies were torn apart and a dove flew down onto him, and a voice, as if from heaven, said to Jesus, "You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased."

Interviewer: So, was that then your job done?

John the Baptist: Well, I carried on doing what I had been but gradually Jesus took over – and that is what was meant to have happened.

Interviewer: Well thank you John.

Day:

Sermon Series

Date:

So John the Baptist was a messenger, the promised one who would come first to tell people of the coming of Jesus the Messiah. And that is what Zechariah said in his prophecy, "And you child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins." That's quite a job that he did.

John the Baptist really encouraged people to ask for forgiveness for the things they had done wrong – so we are going to do the same now.

Come and See

Today we have continued to look at the story of Jesus – but at the same time looking at what was going on around Jesus – not just out of mild curiosity, but I want us to understand what was happening in Jesus' day. It's that favourite word of mine – context – again.

And today's episodes can, without that context, be somewhat confusing. Take the story of the young Samuel that Rachel read to us. If we are not careful we could be sidetracked into wondering what on earth Hannah, Samuel's mother, was doing leaving her much wanted first child in the temple to live a life as a temple servant, when surely he would have had a much better childhood growing up in a loving family. But of course that misses the point of that story altogether: the point being the importance of being obedient to God. Hannah had prayed to God for a child, and so following a normal pattern of behaviour of that time was the right thing to do. And Samuel, with a bit of encouragement from Eli, has a real encounter with God, and has the opportunity to respond. Oh how many of us would just love to hear the actual voice of God calling us.

And then we had our encounter with Zechariah who made the fundamental error of not believing what God was telling him. An angel came to Zechariah and told him that despite their age, Elizabeth would have a baby – not only that but, "you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. "

And Zechariah didn't believe the angel so was struck dumb until he named the baby John. Zechariah was a priest in the temple – yet even he did not really recognise the call of God.

And John the Baptist himself. Do you know we often talk about the fact that Jesus' ministry was only about 3 years. That's about twice the length of John the Baptists. Before he started he lived in the wilderness surviving on what he could find to eat and wearing what he could pull together. And then was his moment when Luke tells us that "the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness, and he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins". And Luke explained why this was happening, quoting from the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord'." And after Jesus came, and was baptised by John, John continue preaching for a while and then was locked up by Herod Antipas, and was then beheaded. A short ministry indeed, but John fully answered what God called him to do.

And then we come to the calling of the disciples. In the various gospels there are different accounts of the calling of the disciples and John's account which we have heard this morning is quite different to that compared to those written by the other three gospel writers. That doesn't mean any of them are wrong. You see the gospels are not chronological history books. They are there to give us a picture of Jesus' ministry, and that's all they can possibly do. John himself explains towards the end of his gospel the contents of his book. "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.

Day:

Sermon Series

Date:

But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." Not a history book but a book about . . . discipleship.

So that is why John describes the calling of the first four or five disciples in the way that he does. And isn't it interesting that the first two disciples called to follow Jesus were before that disciples of John the Baptist – again showing that John the Baptist had a particular job to do, and at some point that ministry would come to an end, and we are approaching that point as Andrew, and an un-named other disciple of John the Baptist left John to follow Jesus. Who was that other disciple – well we don't know but one popular theory is that it is John the apostle, the author of this gospel, who never names himself in his own book – the closest he comes is referring to himself as the beloved disciple. And possibly the most important thing that Andrew did was to go and get his brother, Simon, who we are told Jesus renamed Cephas – which is translated as Peter.

But we mustn't miss the reason that Andrew went to get his brother. "We have found the Messiah". Massive excitement. For hundreds of years the Jewish people have been waiting for the Messiah to come, and here Andrew is saying – He's here. Can you imagine what that must have been like. The whole of your understanding of scripture coming to fruition in front of your very own eyes. How did he know? Well, we are not told, but Andrew clearly knew – it can only have been a message from God.

And then the story of the calling of Andrew and Peter is almost mirrored by John in the calling of Philip and Nathaniel. Philip comes across Jesus first and immediately goes to find Nathaniel – who we assume is a close friend with whom Philip wants to share that same excitement that Andrew wanted to share with his brother. And on hearing this remarkable news about Jesus of Nazareth, the probably disbelieving Nathaniel says, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" I don't think that it is particularly supposed to be a put down of the town of Nazareth, but rather more that in those days Nazareth was a tiny little place, and Nathaniel is expressing a disbelief that this Messiah, that they were expecting to come in glory, as a warrior king, to save the Jewish Nations from the Roman government, could suddenly appear from a tiny place such as Nazareth. And Philip's reply? Well it was the same reply that in the story of Andrew and Peter Jesus gave to Andrew when Andrew asked him, "Where are you staying?" "Come and see." An invitation. And Nathaniel came, and saw, and stated, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel."

Come and See!

Samuel was called to by God, and was told what to do by Eli.

Zechariah was told his prayers had been answered, by an Angel from God.

John the Baptist received the word of God in the Wilderness

Andrew and another un-named disciple of John the Baptist were invited by Jesus to Come and see

Peter was taken to see Jesus by his brother

Philip is called by Jesus to "Follow Me"

Nathaniel was taken to Jesus by his friend, and saw who Jesus was.

Come and See

Which rather leaves us with the question, "How do we meet God today?"

Day:

Sermon Series

Date:

Well, perhaps we meet him in Church on a Sunday Morning. Perhaps we meet him in our prayers in the privacy of our homes. Perhaps we meet him walking or running the footpaths around our villages. Perhaps we meet him at our desks, at our work stations, at the kitchen sink, in the garden. But most importantly, we are unlikely to meet him in the way that Samuel, or Zechariah, or John the Baptist or those early disciples met him, because we live in what feels like a different world.

We live in a world where if you suggest to someone today that they might like to get to know Jesus, their reaction is all too likely to be, "and what's in it for me?" The fact that the answer to that question is "lots" is not the point. When we get to know anyone we do so because we are attracted to them in some way – it may be that we are just interested in them, or it may be that we find out something about them that sparks our interest a little further, or there may even be some sort of physical attraction. But surely the beginning of any relationship with anyone, however platonic or otherwise that may turn out to be, must start by not expecting to receive something but on the basis of giving.

And getting to know Jesus should be the same. When we come to church we come to give ourselves to God in worship. When we pray to God our prayers should always start by thanking him for what he gives us – certainly before we do any asking. When we meet God when busy doing something else it is often the companionship I feel with God which makes me feel better – although the opportunity to say, "Help" when getting stuck is also a very good feeling.

But how does anyone else ever find these things out? Come and See. Archbishop William Temple, when writing about Philip said that as soon as Philip became a disciple of Jesus, he also became a missionary. Philip is not someone we hear a lot more about in the bible but, assuming it is the same Philip, there is the story in the Acts of the Apostles when Philip met the Ethiopian Eunuch. Philip had been guided by God to the road from Jerusalem to Gaza, where he met this high powered official of the Queen of the Ethiopians who was reading a passage from the prophet Isaiah.

"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,

And like a lamb silent before its shearer,

So he does not open his mouth.

In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth."

The Ethiopian asked Philip, "About whom may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" Then Philip explained to him the entire good news of Jesus. Philip the disciple. Philip the missionary.

Come and See

So, from all these stories today the message to us is clear. Andrew went to find his brother. Philip went to find his friend. Philip later went to find the Ethiopian.

Day:

Sermon Series

Date:

Readings

Title

Live Stream @ St Mary's

Who is there that you and I can find and, as a disciple, as a missionary, answer God's call to us and say to them, "Come and See"?

Day:
Sermon Series

Date: