



In this season of Advent it is very appropriate to examine the message of John the Baptist, to work out why that message was so appropriate in its time and to consider its implications for our world and for us.

Setting the Scene

- The Jews' history from their enslavement in Egypt had been a roller-coaster of struggling with the consequences of disobeying their loving, covenant-making God and experiencing His bounty when they obeyed Him. Now they were anxiously waiting for relief from Roman occupation but the Pharisees and Sadducees were sure they weren't obeying the law perfectly enough. One of their remedies was to provide ceremonial baptism so that pilgrims could go into the temple clean enough to worship God.
- John the Baptist was an only child, abnormally conceived by aged parents in and probably orphaned early. He was brought up by the Essenes (a strict Jewish sect) and in adulthood had lived a life of poverty in the desert. He erupted onto the Judean scene, when Jesus was still living in Nazareth, preaching, 'Repent for the Kingdom of God is at Hand'. Later Jesus said of him that no-one is as great as John the Baptist. **Read Matthew 3:1-12.**

The Greatness of John the Baptist.

- **Matt. 3:11.** John insists there is One coming who is more powerful than him.
- **Matt. 11:11.** This was a profound statement to the Jews: Jesus is saying that up to this point in history, John was greater than Moses, Elijah, David, Solomon, Isaiah, Jeremiah, all the good Kings etc., etc.
- **John 10:40-41.** John didn't do miracles or signs: everything he said about Jesus was accurate & true.
- '.....the humility of his ministry was John's "particular greatness." (*Sergius Bulgakov.*)

The Message of John.

- Repentance. Matt 3: 1-6 and John 4: 10, 14.
 - Temple baptismal pools were plumbed to keep the water moving and prevent 'spiritual cross-contamination. John's baptism is in the water of the Jordan River which moves by God's power.
 - The cleansing offered by John is not a ritual: those who repent of their sin will be offered 'Living water.'
- Judgement, or 'the wrath to come.' Matt. 3: 7-10.
 - Perhaps surprisingly, the Pharisees and Sadducees turn up (*for baptism?*) in spite of their belief in salvation through ritual and legalism. John compares them to snakes fleeing from a forest fire.
 - John then offers them hope if they really repent and realise that neither his baptism nor an ancestry going back to Abraham would save them from judgement. They will be judged by their 'fruit.'
 - Any confrontation of justice with injustice is always violent. The question is: who will receive the hit? The offender, or the offended?
- Redemption. Matt. 3: 11-12.
 - Jesus, the offended One, swallows God's wrath for our offences. He takes upon Himself the consequences of the judgement deserved by us all. His first Advent is all about this substitution and redemption, His second Advent is about judgement, but His mercy covers the faithful.
 - Jesus' "Holy Spirit baptism" is not about ceremonial washing, ethnic identity, nor the external things we use to identify ourselves before God. It's internal: it's recognising that what's wrong with me is also what's wrong with the world. It's about our need to be decontaminated from a universally sinful humanity

The message for us.

- Regular church attendance for years and lots of rota duties are truly admirable, but they are no match for faith in Jesus cleansing us from sin and in the Holy Spirit transforming us from the inside out.
- Take up the challenge to become proficient in giving an accurate and truthful account of who Jesus is and what He has done for us. No need to panic about 'preaching' or 'giving a testimony': just learn the creed!

Questions for discussion

1. ***Can we think of other Biblical examples of humility? How do we demonstrate this quality in our 'modern' world?***
2. ***How do we make sure that our baptismal services don't descend into meaningless ritual?***
3. ***Is it possible to be coming to church as an 'insurance policy' against possible judgement? What would John think?***
4. ***How do we reconcile our understanding of Jesus' perfect character with His rôles as both Redeemer and Judge?***
5. ***Can we remember Peter's illustration about 'decontamination' involving a cup of tea and someone else's finger?!***
6. ***Can any of us witness to an internal transformation in either ourselves or in someone else?***
7. ***Are we ready to take on John the Baptist's type of greatness?***