

THE BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST – ST HELEN’S, ABINGDON
23 June 2024



Isaiah 40.1–11 / Galatians 3.23–29 / Luke 1.57–66, 80

Make straight in the desert a highway for our God

 In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – *Amen*

PITY THE POOR PROPHETS: they undertook to convey God’s word to resistant, reluctant audiences, warning and exhorting, taking names and pointing fingers, for the well-being of the holy people of God. But the message they brought — most often a denunciation of social abuses and theological heedlessness — didn’t make people shape up and forswear their foolish ways, any more than our present keen awareness that we live in the throes of a global environmental crisis doesn’t make us stop driving cars or squandering vast amounts of energy to support imaginary cryptocurrencies with comical names. The people of Judah and Israel, like people today, didn’t *heed* the prophets, reforming their theology and repenting their sins, but rather they *displaced* the effort it would take actually to change their way of life into *hostility* directed against the prophet who brought the message.

So who wants to be a prophet, if speaking God’s truth to a resistant populace just means unpopularity? Sure, everyone likes the idea of being able to predict the future when it means knowing what the exam question will be, or when placing a wager on the date of an election; but when it comes to dressing down your fellow citizens for the sins to which they have become accustomed, a prophet’s lot is not an happy

one. Amos didn't want to be a prophet: 'No prophet I, nor the son of a prophet, but a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees'; Isaiah didn't want to be a prophet: 'I am a man of unclean lips!' Jeremiah didn't want to be a prophet: 'Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.' It seems as though there's only one sort of person who actually *wants* to be a prophet, who goes about announcing their *prophetic* ministry; that sort of person inspired a former seminary Dean of my acquaintance to formulate Lemler's Prophetic Syllogism:

Biblical prophets are obnoxious

I am obnoxious.

Therefore I am a prophet.

But being a prophet is not a fall-back career option for jobseekers who are difficult to get along with; God *calls* prophets for specific times and places, and their unpopularity — their *obnoxiousness*, as Dean Lemler put it — is down solely to our reluctance to order our lives in the way God has been teaching us all along, from Eden to Sinai to Zion to Galilee to the New Jerusalem for which we wait.

John the Baptist stands squarely in that line of God's prophets. He didn't *ask* to be a prophet; he didn't spend his afternoon hours growing up by practising oracles. *God* called *him*, called him even before he was born, to alert the people of Judea to what God planned, and to what God asked of them. John invited everyone who truly wanted to prepare for the irruption of God into this world, invited them to straighten up their affairs, wash away their past sins, and embrace the coming kingdom of God. He warned everyone that God was going to settle up with humanity, that the axe was set at the root of the tree to cut down the growth of human iniquity. He called the throngs who came to hear him 'snakes in the grass', he called out an adulterous ruler, he rebuked exploitation and demanded that we practise generous charity toward our hungry, homeless neighbours. He offended the wrong people, and

he ended up with his head on the platter of an adolescent go-go dancing princess. But John's not a killjoy, an ill-tempered busybody prying into our business for the bitter satisfaction of squashing our fun; he, like most of the prophets, wanted to free us from our servitude to sin, and especially to that most subtle and persistent sin, the attempt to justify ourselves to God.

So when John proclaims the coming of the Lord, he urges us to make straight our crooked ways, to level up our highways, to *repent of all our sins* so that we can rise up and greet our Saviour with whole-hearted, unfeigned, fearless joy. Repent, not by searching the Law for loopholes, not by trying to find commandments that require us to do what we secretly desire to, but by getting over the besetting fear that we have to *earn* God's favour, that God won't love us unless we're *good enough*. John exhorts us to love *our neighbour* so that we give, freely and abundantly, out of the sheer the pleasure of seeing our neighbour experience the relief, the comfort that many of us can take for granted. John teaches us to be honest about ourselves, knowing that if we try to *hide* our sins, if our welcome is mixed with dread that the Judge will convict us publicly for our unrepented secret misconduct, if our hearts are brimful of anxiety, we can't rightly rejoice.

But no: as Isaiah said before him, 'Comfort, *comfort* my people,' says the Lord; 'preach peace, speak tenderly.' The message of the gospel, the same message pronounced by the company of prophets right down to John the Baptist, reminds us that *we do not need an extrinsic justification* when the Spirit of God, dwelling in our hearts from the time of our baptism, waits patiently for us to follow as the Spirit leads us in ways of peace and justice. Set the Spirit free in your heart, and you will no longer desire what the Law forbids; the law was our *disciplinarian*, says St Paul. He means 'a disciplinarian' not as a harsh scold, but as a tutor

always present to remind, as our lollipop lady, until Christ came. But now that faith has come, we no longer need a lollipop lady to help us cross streets, for in Christ Jesus we children of God have left behind the dangerous impulses, the foolish desires that misled us when we were younglings. And if we have outgrown the need for lollipop ladies, we need not fear judgement, we need not study the Law to determine circumstances when we can justify leaping into traffic; we have been set free in the Spirit, free to do the joyous, peaceable, *safe*, grown-up walking on that well-paved, high road that leads to forgiveness, relief, to everlasting life —

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,

Amen