

Trinity College Cambridge
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PEOPLE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT
JOHN THE BAPTIST

Malachi 3: 1–6 Matthew 3: 1–12

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I heard somebody say on Radio 4 the other day that as a young girl she was obsessed with, of all people, John the Baptist. “As biblical pin ups go,” she said, “he had a lot going for him. He was, for me, a fashion icon with his loin cloth, bushy beard, eating locusts and honey and following the paths of self-denial by spending time in the wilderness.” For most of us by contrast he appears a bit strange and even creepy.

Yet the historian Josephus says that he was a good man, wanting people to be fair and just and loving to their neighbours. He certainly seems to have had lots of followers for, according to the Gospels, in spite of his seeming harsh and uncompromisingly stark message ‘Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand you brood of vipers. Flee from the wrath to come for someone is coming with a winnowing fan in his hand who will clear his threshing floor, gather wheat into barns and burn the chaff’ – all images drawn from the prophet Malachi – people still seemed to flock to him. He baptised many, including Jesus, at a time when baptism was not a Jewish practice, although a few communities around the Dead Sea went in for it.

On the face of it, it does not seem a message that fills the heart with gladness and yet John’s message was different from that of the Old Testament prophets. They had chastised people for their sins, told them that God would punish them harshly and then after they had repented, God would forgive them. John, by contrast, invited people to repent after they had sinned, in order to avoid punishment, so that they might be ready to enter a new relationship with God, through baptism. He said that he was preparing the way of the Lord and that whereas he baptised with water, Jesus would baptise with the Spirit. Jesus, of course, went much further than John because He assured people that they were forgiven even before they had repented.

Jesus reached out to all kinds of people whom his society found unacceptable on account of their gender, illness or sin. He drank and ate with all kinds of undesirables and assured those who were on the edges of life and marginalised, that they were accepted by God without reserve. God’s love proclaimed by Him was not a conditional love but a love that persevered when it was not returned, extravagantly poured out on all indiscriminately – a reckless generous love which invited his recipients to the same kind of reckless generous

love towards others. Women, children, tax collectors, prostitutes, foreigners were made to feel especially accepted. “Go and tell John what you hear and see” said Jesus to John’s disciples “the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up and the poor have good news preached to them.”

The Church has forgotten the context of John’s message and puts emphasis on his seeming judgement and harshness. It often appears to outsiders, as a judgemental unforgiving institution. It seems, at times, to forget the central thrust of the Gospel, of God’s mercy, grace and compassion towards people, as exemplified by Jesus, before they had taken a step towards Him – as illustrated in Jesus’s parables of God seeking the lost and alienated. During the week of Nelson Mandela’s funeral, one South African church condemned him to Hell because of his adultery, whilst most of the world praised him for his work of reconciliation which averted civil war.

Flannery O’Connor, the American author has a story called *The River*. It is about a little boy called Bevel whose parents are too busy to have any time for him so he is shunted off to the care of a kind country woman. One day, when she is out with him by the river, they come across a preacher baptising people in its waters. Without warning, the preacher picks up Bevel, swings him under the water and baptises him. Then he lifts him up in the air and looking him straight in the eyes he says to him, “You count, you count”.

The preacher’s words are similar to those uttered at the baptism of Jesus, ‘In you I take great delight’. The Church of God exists primarily to proclaim the message of Jesus to all who will hear, “you count, you count”. God takes great delight in us because we are made in His image and bear the stamp of His very nature, whoever we are. He loves us unconditionally.

It is summed up for me in words the bishop utters to each person he is about to confirm in the Church in Wales: “God has called you by name and made you his own”. We are loved and accepted by God. Somehow we have misunderstood and misinterpreted the message. It has been lost in translation. It is a very simple and profound message but many people, Christians among them, find it very hard to believe that God loves them without reserve.

John Austin Baker, a former Bishop of Salisbury, has a wonderful book called *Travels in Oudamovia* and in it, he has a passage, and I quote:

You say that there is still something we have to do, some contribution we have to make, in order to achieve the state of salvation and become children of God. For you, faith is the one work needful. But people do not have to do anything. It is all grace. It is not even that there is a door which Christ has unbolted, and we, standing outside it, have to stretch out our hand, lift the latch and walk through. We are already inside. All we are asked to do is to open our eyes and recognise where we are. Once we have done that, then we shall look down at ourselves and our filthy bodies and our tattered clothes and we shall say “I am not fit to be here, in Paradise” and we shall ask for baptism to wash us clean, and for the white robe of chrism to clothe us in the righteousness of the Lord. *But not in order that we may be saved – simply because this is fitting for those who have been saved.*

Many people regard God as an angry god, a vengeful god, a god whose love has to be earned – certainly not a god whose nature and whose name is love. That is often either because they think of themselves as unlovable or somehow the Church of God has conveyed to them the impression that they are unlovable and that God is more a God of judgement than mercy.

Both John and Jesus asked people to repent because the kingdom of God was at hand. John's message still held the threat of punishment and wrath unless repentance was forthcoming, whereas Jesus embodied a God who looks for the lost to assure them of His love. That is why Jesus said of him, that no-one greater than John had been born and yet, he who is least in the Kingdom of God is greater than him.

John, having baptised Jesus, was put to death. Having launched that public ministry, he did not live to see the results of his labour because he was beheaded by Herod almost immediately afterwards. He did not see the teaching, healing, preaching ministry, nor the transformation Jesus wrought in the lives of the people He touched.

Actually, of course, the same thing was true of Jesus himself. He did not see the results of His labour either. He died probably thinking He was a failure. Although He had drawn crowds during His lifetime, they, in the end, had turned against Him and He died deserted by His disciples, who misunderstood almost everything He taught, condemned both by church, the High Priest Caiaphas and State, Herod and Pilate, and He also thought, according to St Mark's Gospel, that He had also been forsaken by God. And yet, here we are, two thousand years later, part of a world-wide community of Christians with hundreds of millions of followers. Some people do not see the results of their labour, they simply get on with the task in hand and do not worry about results.

I realise that there is something incongruous in saying that in a university context but it is true. Mahatma Gandhi sought to remove British rule and bring about a peaceful Indian state where Hindu, Sikh and Muslims could co-exist, but he died before his vision came to fruition. Martin Luther King fought for the rights of black people in the 1960's in the USA because he was appalled by the segregation laws, and he was assassinated and did not live to see the fruits of his victory. Like Jesus, they were people content to do what was right and who did not worry unduly about the results – they left that to others and to God.

As the Bible puts it, 'Others have laboured we have entered into their labour'. And that may prove to be true of some of our future work as well. Sufficient for us to do what is right, and just, and to have the confidence and faith that these values are the ones which ultimately count, for the future is in God's hands and we should not worry unduly about results.