

13th December 2020 6pm John Calling in the Desert

Service led by Paul Lewis, Sermon by Val Whiteman

Bible readings by Felicity Hawke and Rosie Lee. Prayers by Gill Palmer

This transcript is only of the readings and the talk.

1st Reading: 1 Thessalonians 5: 16-24

[Felicity Hawke:]

Our first reading this evening is from the first letter to Thessalonians, chapter 5, starting at verse 16.

16 Rejoice always, 17 pray continually, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

19 Do not quench the Spirit. 20 Do not treat prophecies with contempt 21 but test them all; hold on to what is good, 22 reject every kind of evil.

23 May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

And now we go to Rosie for the second reading.

2nd Reading: John 1: 6-8, 19-28

[Rosie Lee:]

And our second reading is taken from John chapter one, verses six to eight and verses 19 to 28. And I'm reading from the New International Version.

6 There was a man sent from God whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. 8 He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

19 Now this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. 20 He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, 'I am not the Messiah.'

21 They asked him, 'Then who are you? Are you Elijah?'

He said, 'I am not.'

'Are you the Prophet?'

He answered, 'No.'

22 Finally they said, 'Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?'

23 John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, 'I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, "Make straight the way for the Lord."'

24 Now the Pharisees who had been sent 25 questioned him, 'Why then do you baptise if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?'

26 'I baptise with water,' John replied, 'but among you stands one you do not know. 27 He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.'

28 This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptising.

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

And now over to Val for our evening sermon.

Sermon

[Val Whiteman:] Thanks Rosie.

[Rosie Lee:] Thank you.

[Val:] So this is the third week in Advent; and Advent, as we all know, is the time when we think about the joy of the coming King, that Jesus will come back one day. And we remember too the baby in the manger. And in Advent we focus on the different aspects of how we know that the Messiah came with Jesus and will come again. And tonight we look at John the Baptist.

It's a bit of an odd year, or everybody says so, isn't it? The celebrations we're going to have at Christmas are going to be a little bit muted, but maybe that's a good thing because we focus on the essence of what Christmas means to us, and we can now think about all these past people in our own lives, and in the Bible, who've testified to the coming King, and who are waiting now for His return in glory.

So if we look at John for a little while, John pops up, as it were, in the beginning of that great hymn to Christ the Light, which we usually end our carol services with, and we usually miss out the bit about John the Baptist, we want to focus at that point on Jesus the light, not on His forerunner. But John, the writer of the gospel, is actually contrasting these two figures in the beginning of his gospel:

- Christ is from the beginning from eternity, whereas John came like other human beings into the world.
- Jesus is the Word of God incarnate, John merely human.
- Jesus is God, John is sent from God.
- Jesus is the light of the world, and John bears witness to that light.
- We trust in Jesus, and John shows by his testimony that Jesus is to be trusted.

I think it's pretty amazing that John the gospel writer manages all that lot in two verses, verses 6 to 8, when he contrasts these two, Jesus and John, showing their different functions, and makes it clear that John the Baptist's role really is a forerunner.

And then in the rest of the reading, we have what you might call the committee sent from Jerusalem. John's reputation has been spreading. Is he the Messiah, or at least a Messiah? Is he Elijah reborn? How should he be seen? Is he a threat? Because John has been doing unusual things. He's been baptising for a start, and the Pharisees know from their reading of the prophet Ezekiel, in chapter 36, verse 25, that God does the cleansing. It's a Messianic trait, it's not something that even prophets do, because there in Ezekiel it says,

25 I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. **26** I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you...

It's a sign that the Messiah is bringing salvation to Israel. And also baptism is a little bit odd for the Jewish people. Usually only Jewish converts got baptised as a sign that they were being cleansed from their sins, and were therefore acceptable to God. To baptise the children of Abraham was extremely strange. It was saying, like any Gentile they had to be cleansed, they weren't special, or at least not special enough.

So, when the committee asks John who he thinks he is, then he is very clear indeed: he isn't the Messiah, he isn't Elijah. As you probably know, the Jewish teachers were expecting a major prophet to appear before the Messiah came, because of what was said in Malachi chapter 4 verse 5, the last verse of our Old Testament. All John says he is, is a herald who announces that the King is on

His way, a voice crying in the wilderness. And this is Isaiah's prophecy when the exile was over and the Jews are going back to their homeland. In Isaiah chapter 40 verse 3, it says, the verse that John uses, it's a time of rejoicing because they were forgiven and restored.

So John sees himself as not even being like a person. He's a voice. It's what he says that is important, and not who he is. Notice in verse 15 of John 1, which we didn't read, John cries out. And the thing he cries out is, "He who comes after me has surpassed me because He was before me." That's his message. Now, John the Baptist says the prophecy is being fulfilled in a new way. Isaiah said, "Make straight the way for the King." Everyone in the Kingdom now has to prepare, just as the people had to make the highway clear and straight for the king and his entourage to travel back into his kingdom. This means getting ready. John baptises because people need to repent to get ready. But accepting that repentance and forgiving the people is not something that John can do. That's something God does. So John is really important in alerting people to the fact that the King is coming, but he's also extremely *unimportant*, because he does not witness the power and might of the King, he's killed by Herod before that happens, and as you know, he has doubts even as to whether he was right about Jesus after he was imprisoned.

Jesus tells us that he is the greatest prophet, but John is the least in the new Kingdom. He's the last Old Covenant prophet, because Jesus says in Matthew chapter 11 verse 11, "Truly I tell you, among those born of women, there isn't one greater than John the Baptist, yet whoever is least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than he." And John himself recognises this humble place, and is willing to serve there. He also accepts his role is transitory: he has a job to do. And when it's done then he becomes unimportant while Jesus' role grows and increases. He serves God, as God calls him to do.

You remember that he encourages the disciples to go and seek Jesus. He doesn't try to hang on to them as perhaps some prophets might have done. People like us in the church should be doing this all the time. We're given various roles and sometimes these roles disappear, or sometimes someone else comes to do them. So how do we react? Paul in the Thessalonians reading that Felicity brought to us says, "Rejoice always." We serve where we're called, listening to the Spirit of God and being joyful, whether we feel we're serving or not. And it's really important we learn this lesson. We aren't like people in the world who are ambitious to get on to have a really important place in the church and be respected. We're like John: we listen to God's voice, and we point to Him, we are His voice. We don't point to ourselves. Now, I don't know about you, but this is something I find extremely hard to do by myself. My own voice, my own ambition, my own wish for a place to be loved in the church, is very, very strong. I have to go back to the Holy Spirit time and time again and ensure that I live within it, so that I can be filled and sanctified for service, whatever that might be. It's always important to respect your fellow servants too. They may be doing a job that you think you could be doing an awful lot better. But as the body of Christ, we're supposed to support one another, to help each other, and to grow.

So we think about John the baptist as we come up to Christmas, and it does seem odd that we're whizzing through to the baptism of Christ at the moment when we're thinking of Him, a tiny baby in a manger, but we think about John the Baptist as this person who is almost like a signpost pointing to the power and might of the Messiah who comes, and that is definitely our job. Jesus has come, He's with us, but we still need to point other people to Him, to forget ourselves and to remember the One in whom we live and move and have our being.

Paul sums up his desire for the Thessalonians and for us in the reading that we had, and I'd like as I finish to read that to you again, and listen to it as a blessing and as a going forward to Christmas time.

23 May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And this is the really important bit:

24 The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

Amen .

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

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