

## St George Edgbaston – 24 June 2018 (The Birth of John the Baptist)

(Isaiah 40:1-11; Luke 1:57-60,80)

“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.” I can’t hear those words spoken out loud without hearing them in my head, sung to the music of Handel. They are the opening words of his *Messiah*. “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.”

Why read that passage today? Because of the words that follow almost immediately: “The voice of one that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord.” The Gospel writers read those words from Isaiah as a prophecy of John the Baptist, whose birth we remember today, which is old Midsummer’s Day.

We naturally think of John as a severe figure. The Gospels tell us how he appeared in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. They portray him as a severe and abstemious figure, clothed with camel’s hair and living on a diet of locusts and wild honey. How does that fit with Isaiah’s message of comfort for a battered people? But just think about it. The news that we can repent, and turn to God and be forgiven, the news that we need not be trapped in the failures of the past – that is comfort, that is good news for us all.

We’ll be using that language of repentance in a few minutes, the language of turning round, of turning from sin and turning to Christ.

This is good news, not only good news for a lost and broken people in the days of Isaiah five hundred years before Jesus was born, not only for the Jews of Jesus’ own time, but also for us and all who live in the wilderness of the times that we now live in. We may have lost sight of our God. It may seem to us that God has hidden his face from us. But he is close at hand. Think of John’s words to the people who had come to be baptized in the Jordan, “Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me.”<sup>1</sup> We may not see him, but he is with us. The Lord is at hand. That is good news. So let us be ready. That is John’s message.

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<sup>1</sup> John 1:26f.

There's another day in the year when we remember John the Baptist. That's on the Third Sunday of Advent, when we are preparing for Christmas. The special prayer for that Sunday, the collect as we call it, draws a parallel between the task that God gave to John in his day and the task he continues to give to the Church's priests and ministers.

O Lord Jesus Christ,  
who at your first coming sent your messenger  
to prepare your way before you:  
grant that the ministers and stewards of your mysteries  
may likewise so prepare and make ready your way...

So that's one of the tasks of your parish priests and of all Christ's ministers - to be the John the Baptists of our own time, to help prepare our hearts to receive the Lord when he comes to us, to point not to themselves but to God and his Christ.

But this isn't a task that we can simply outsource to the clergy and leave it at that. John is a model for us all. As Jesus was preparing to return to his Father, he said to us all, "You will be my witnesses." And he promised to us all the gift and presence of his Holy Spirit to help us bear witness.<sup>2</sup>

Now, as much as ever, the world needs this witness. John was sent to bear witness in a wilderness. And so are we. The world we live in is a wilderness, a wilderness of aimlessness, of fear, of acquisitiveness and violence; a wilderness where many people think that there is no objective truth, and that right and wrong are what we want them to be; a wilderness in which God is forgotten, indeed, where it is taken for granted that there is no God. And with the loss of God, there comes the loss of the sense that we are created and so answerable for our lives. With the loss of God, we lose the sense that we are held in being by love.

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<sup>2</sup> See Luke 24:48f; Acts 1:8

This world needs our witness. God's face may be hidden, but he invites us to turn and know that he is at hand, closer to us than we are to ourselves. The world needs our witness that we are made and held in God's love, so that life is worth living, worth living for God and for one another. The world needs our witness to the Lord's resurrection, our witness to the truth that the self-giving love of God, revealed in Jesus Christ, cannot and will not be defeated.

Why are we here at all? Why have you four come to be confirmed? Because of the witness of others – members of your family, or friends, or somebody else. We wouldn't be here but for the people who have been with us on the way. And what we have received, we are to share. We in our turn are called to bear witness.

Christians in every age are called to be like John the Baptist, bearing witness and preparing the way of the Lord in his world's wilderness. We don't know how or when he will show himself. But this we know, that the Lord will come, and that his coming will bring comfort.

The prayer for today gives us some guidance about what we have to do and how we are to do it.

First, we are "to repent according to John's preaching". If we in our time are to bear witness, we too have to repent and turn to the Lord. This repentance or turning is not for one day only, whether it is the day of our baptism or confirmation or the day when we have come to see the light of Christ in a new way. Repentance is something for every day. The whole Christian life is a life of turning to Christ again and again, day after day. Every day we need the grace and strength of the Spirit of Christ in order to stay rooted in him.

So then, we are to repent according to John's preaching. And, so the prayer teaches us, we are to follow his example. We are "constantly to speak the truth". That means that first of all we have to ask for the help of the Spirit in discerning the truth, so that we ourselves are not confused or deceived about what is true and right. Every day we need to ask for the light of the Spirit so that we may witness to what is true.

Next we are “boldly to rebuke vice”. That does not mean that we are to spend our time making ourselves disagreeable by denouncing other people’s wickedness. It means that our lives must themselves be a witness to integrity and justice. It means not colluding with injustice. It can sometimes mean speaking out, but more often what is required is simply that we do not go along with what we know to be wrong, and that we stand by those who are the victims of injustice.

Finally, we to be ready “patiently to suffer for the truth’s sake.” Put simply, we are to walk in the footsteps of our Lord. We are to take up our cross, whatever it is, and follow him. Just look at the story of Christ’s passion. Or look at what became of John the Baptist. He lost his life for speaking the truth. Truth always excites the hostility of falsehood. Power is always afraid of losing control, and so it always tramples if it can on those who call it into question.

There is no need to be a misery about all of this. But there is a need to be strong, as Jesus was strong, and as John was strong. Strong in the power of the Holy Spirit, which the Lord gives every day to those who pray for this gift.

Isaiah’s message was a message of comfort. And so is ours. “Comfort, O comfort my people.” The Lord is at hand. First we have to turn to the Lord and hear this good news for ourselves. We have to make it our own. Then we shall ourselves be able to be a living sign of God’s comfort in this comfortless world.

We heard in the Gospel how Zechariah had to insist on the name for his son. He wrote it down: “His name is John.” That name is no accident. The name John means, “The Lord has comforted us.” John was sent to prepare us to hear the good news that God is love. God made us. God loves us. And we are his. John was sent to bear witness to God’s truth. We too are now sent to bear witness to the same truth.