

**ADVENT II in Year C    The Sunday of St John the Baptist    5 December 2021**

A Homily preached by the Reverend Roger B. White in St Mark's Church, Bridgewater, Connecticut

*Malachi 3.1-4; Song of Zechariah (Luke 1.68-79); Philippians 1.3-11; Luke 3.1-6*

Today is the second Sunday of a new year in the Church: it is the Second Sunday of Advent and is the Sunday when, each year, we make our re-acquaintance with St John the Baptistiser –St John the Baptist. That is how important he is to the stories of our Faith: we need to know about him before we reacquaint ourselves with his kinsman of some sort, Jesus. Their mothers are related to one another because each is a member of the priestly house of Aaron –an important family in ancient Judaism.

And their births are each unexpected, indeed, miraculous: six months before the Archangel Gabriel appears to Mary and tells her that she will have a child without a human father, Gabriel has appeared to the elderly Zechariah and told him that he and his elderly wife Elizabeth are at last to have a child whom they shall name John. This is important: just as Gabriel tells Mary that her son will be named Jesus, so Zechariah and Elizabeth receive instructions as to John's name. In Hebrew theology, naming someone confers authority over that person (remember that in Genesis God tells Adam to name each of the creatures in the garden, giving him authority over them, responsibility for them). Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary (and her fiancé Joseph) are granted no such thing over the sons whom they shall raise: these two boys will answer only to the God who assigns their names, and in Jesus' case is the father.

Which goes a long way in explaining John's ... dramatic ... presence that so startles, so enralls, and so often scares people. His preaching is fiery and compelling, recalling the old prophets, most especially Elijah. Matthew's Gospel tells us that he smells of camels because he wore their pelts, and that for food he favors locusts with honey: he is decidedly outside of social norms. John clearly comes from another world.

And whereas Jesus' teachings will challenge the conventional pieties of the Temple authorities – the Pharisees and the Scribes—and disputes their interpretations of Torah, John calls for a 'baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins'. He stridently proclaims that it is not enough just to be a Jew –to say that 'we have Abraham as our ancestor'—but that each individual person must repent and be baptized.

Now baptism has some tradition within Judaism, but John's call is for something very much outside of this. It is a summons, beginning with God's people and that Jesus will extend to all people –Samaritans, even Greeks, Gentiles—to enter into a Covenant with God that is different from the former Covenants that the Jews have never seemed to be able to keep.

They have, many of them, repeatedly failed to keep the Commandments and have sought out idols and honored false gods, including power and wealth and so much else. They have, many of them, failed to keep Kosher. They have, many of them, found it convenient to keep the Sabbath or to shun a Gentile if it means not going out of their way to do something so as to be a blessing. In

short, they have, many of them, been ordinary human beings, a lot like the Gentiles, and not a people obviously set apart. And because the Covenants have been with all of them—a people and not individual persons—well, the people have failed ....

And so John calls on each one of them to begin again, to try again with baptism. John's summons to individual, person-by-person, baptism for repentance —*μετανοια* in Greek, 'a turning around', 'a changing of heart or mind or life'—is something that Jesus endorses and blesses by inviting John to baptize him. And that baptism by John is the beginning of Jesus' own ministry of teaching, preaching, and healing. It begins with the understanding that, person by person, we each need to turn around and to start over, to remember how often —each day, each hour—we need to rethink what we have just said or done and then to try again, to say or to do differently.

The circumstances of John's and Jesus' births —that they are responsible to no one other than to God—and John's proclamation of a baptism of repentance, using baptism in a wholly new way to signal an intentional change of heart and mind and actions—these are signals that in these kinsmen God is beginning something new in our world. The old Covenants that so few have been able to keep are being supplemented by a new relationship with God, each of us realizing how important it is for us to rethink, to reconsider, to try over and over again to be different than we have been, more and more like who in Christ Jesus God calls us to be.

John tells everyone that the call to repentance is for 'forgiveness' —in Greek, *αφεσιν*. Which has to do with being set free as a slave is set free, with being freed from other gods, including wealth or power; with being freed from the demands of others who want us to satisfy only their appetites.

You see, before we can really begin to hear what Jesus is saying, we need to hear the voice of John the Baptist, who tells the Holy People that there is more to Holiness than being part of a group, a club. Holiness has to do with the disposition of our individual hearts and minds: it has to do with repentance, with changing each of our hearts and minds, in order to have the freedom, each of us, to hear the voice of God in God's Son our Savior, Jesus. Amen.