

Epiphany 2
16/01/2011

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 49:1 - 7

Psalms 40

1 Corinthians 1:1 - 9

John 1:29-42

Sermon preached by Rev. Peter Blackwood

John the Baptist could have been a real problem for the Church. In terms of modern day promotional hazards, John could be a competitor for the loyalties of people seeking a way to live by. His teaching was aligned with the will of Israel's God. He presented a threat to political equilibrium. Like Jesus he had a following of disciples, he spoke a prophetic word, he was killed as a political prisoner.

Why mention John in the Jesus story? Luke points up an issue of John's influence that presented a challenge to the teaching of the Church:

Acts 18:24-26 *Now there came to Ephesus a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria. He was an eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures. ²⁵ He had been instructed in the Way of the Lord; and he spoke with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. ²⁶ He began to speak boldly in the synagogue; but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately.*

Acts 19:1-3 *While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. ² He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They replied, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." ³ Then he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They answered, "Into John's baptism."*

Why mention John? He provided a contrast to Jesus in his manner of life style that could be more appealing to some:

Matthew 11:18-19 *For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; ¹⁹ the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'*

Why mention John?

Why mention John when, as Luke did, you have to tell such detailed stories of the birth of John and of Jesus to firmly establish the preeminence of Jesus. John's mother was barren, but Jesus' mother was a virgin. The fetus of John got excited when he heard the voice of the mother of Jesus. John's father was of a priestly family. Jesus' father was of King David's family. That bit is a slightly tricky if Joseph is not the biological father, but that is the way Luke tells it. Status is being established in a way not uncommon in the stories of heroes of the ancient world.

Why mention John? Were there not other teachers of the time that attracted popular attention – Gamaliel was a respected Pharisee teacher. Paul had been one of his disciples. The Essenes of the Dead Sea Scroll fame provided some alternative life choices. There have been some bizarre links made between the Essenes and Jesus to explain his resurrection – all good *Da Vinci Code* stuff.

No other leaders of thought get any mention like John does. Could John not be left out of the Jesus story too?

Why is John mentioned? There is the awkward reality that Jesus can appear to have started out as a disciple of John. Jesus was baptized by John. Can the baptizee be greater than the baptizer? **Matthew 3:13-14** *Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"*

Well, it seems there was no getting away from it. John did have to be mentioned in the Jesus story, but it has to be made very clear who holds the greater status. As the Christmas season has reminded us, Luke makes this clear from the start in the birth stories.

All the gospel writers make it clear from John's own mouth:

Mark sets the pace for the synoptic gospels. The John verses Jesus business has to be dealt with right from the start. Mark begins his gospel:

Mark 1:1-7 *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. ² As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; ³ the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"⁷ He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.*

In terms of status Mark ranks John very highly – he is of the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke.

John consistently points to one who is still to come. Why mention John? Because humans need a human agent to tell them who Jesus is. For that purpose God gave us John the baptizer who announced that the world should prepare for the coming Christ, then when he came it was John who was able to say, 'there he is.' In Byzantine iconography John the Baptist is often depicted standing turned slightly sideways gesturing beyond himself to the one who is to come.

The Evangelist John is very particular about the baptizer's credentials and mission. Once he is done with his monumental prologue – In the beginning was the Word etc. he gets right in to deal with the baptizer. He sets up a conversation with authorities from Jerusalem to have John say that he is not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor Isaiah, but the one who Isaiah spoke about – the voice crying in the wilderness. As in the other gospels there is a self-deprecating posture in the baptizer, for there is still one who is coming and the baptizer's worth is nothing by comparison with him.

In John's gospel the task of the Baptizer to make Jesus known as the coming one from God is taken a significantly bit further than the other gospels. Jesus encounters John by the Jordan River when he is baptized. There is the memorable disagreement over who should be baptizing who in Matthew. It is this public conversation that signals that the coming one has indeed come.

In John's gospel the Baptizer very deliberately points to Jesus and names him as the coming one in terms that appear nowhere else in scripture. It is a curious expression that is somewhat ambiguous. Suffice it say that his words make it clear that he is pointing to Jesus as the Christ of God – a designation of Jesus as Christ which is taken up in the liturgy of the Church – it is familiar to us all – *the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*. but wait, there is more – not only does the Baptizer name Jesus as the lamb of God, but he says it again in the hearing of two of his own disciples, one of them was Andrew, and they go and make their acquaintance with Jesus and become his disciples. They, in turn, make it known that Jesus is the Messiah of God and make further introductions.

This is the pattern or template for evangelism. The Church lives in that line of disciples who named Jesus as the coming one of God who takes away the sin of the world.

The Church is more than a community that imitates the ideas and actions of Jesus. The Church claims that this Jesus died and is alive and active in the world.

Why mention John? Because, when the world needed someone to announce Christ's coming and to point to Jesus as the coming one, God gave us John the Baptist. In subsequent generations, as we have needed a voice to point to the life and light of Christ taking away the sin of the world God has given the Church. The Church can look to John as an exemplar who spoke in sacrament and word to make Christ known in the world. That calling is ours.
