

The Birth of John the Baptist

Sermon for the Parish of South Darebin, 23 June 2024

Isaiah 49: 1–6; Acts 13: 22–26; Luke 1: 57–66, 80

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Today we celebrate the birth of John the Baptist. John the Baptist did not have a long life – he probably died before he turned 33 as he was beheaded before Jesus’ crucifixion and was only six months older than him, and we know Jesus was 33 when he died. So why should we mark John’s birth, as Christians have been doing for centuries?

I want to suggest the following reasons:

First, *his birth was miraculous* in that he was born to elderly, righteous parents who had previously been childless and who had been praying for a baby. An angel appeared to his father Zechariah while he was performing his priestly duties and said:

“Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” (Luke 1: 13–17)

Now as many of you will know, Zechariah did not believe the angel at first and so became mute until John’s birth, but today we will leave that aspect of his remarkable birth story.

Second, *John was born for heavenly purposes as the greatest Prophet of all.*

(a) he was born to turn many people to the Lord. You will remember the key phrase of his preaching was ‘Repent – turn away from your sin, be baptised so that your sin might be forgiven, because the kingdom of Heaven is near!’ This was a truly radical message because the Jewish people believed that they were safe before God because they were the children of Abraham, and here he was calling them to turn away from their sin and to be baptised – washed – as they would expect the ‘unclean’ Gentiles to be washed for forgiveness if they were to become Jewish.

(b) he was to prepare the way for the Lord Jesus. In the Gospel of Luke, we read that John

... went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made

straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” (Luke 3: 3–6)

You will remember that John said, “I baptise you with water, but one is coming after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not fit to untie. He will baptise you with Holy Spirit and with fire.” (Matthew 3: 11).

John was so important as he was the herald of the Saviour. He was the one sent by God to point people to him. John said, “don’t look at me – look at Him!” And my friends, this should be our cry too! ‘Do not look at me! Do not look at the church! Look at *him* because he is the one who baptises with Holy Spirit and fire. He is the Saviour of the world.’

Third, John is one of the Saints who has *left for us a wonderful example to follow* of Holy living and dedication to God.

John had a simple (if not unusual) lifestyle. During his ministry he lived in the wilderness near the Jordan River and had a simple diet of locusts and wild honey! John never claimed to be important. He pointed people to God and called them to holiness of life. Surely this is something that we should all try to copy. We do not have to eat locusts along with our honey each morning, but I do believe that we must learn to live simply so that others may simply live.

John did not only call people to repent from their sin – that is, to change direction – he explicitly challenged them to “bear fruit worthy of repentance” (Luke 3: 8).

Luke records for us:

And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” Even tax collectors came to be baptised, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation and be satisfied with your wages.” (Luke 3: 10–14)

Surely these words are words for us too. We should ponder them and ask in what ways we might have ‘two coats’ to share with those who have none? In what ways do we ‘have food’ that should be shared with those who have none? How must we ensure that we don’t extort people in our dealings with them?

If you think about it, John was saying to the people, “It’s not enough just to go through the motions of repentance. It’s not enough to simply come for baptism and seek forgiveness.” True repentance requires us to *change* our ways. It requires us to live holy lives as John did. And, far more than that, John called the people, as he calls us, to look to the one who came after him – the one who baptises with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

Today, as we celebrate again the birth of John the Baptist, let us

- give thanks for his miraculous birth
- give thanks that John pointed people to Jesus and called them to repent
- seek to copy John's life of holy living, not only with our words, but in the way we live – loving God and loving our neighbour as we love ourselves.

Amen.