

Our Advent theme today is John the Baptist and it would be good if you could turn to page _____ of the New Testament of the Bible to the second reading from Matthew's gospel that Katy read to us. If we look at v 11 we see that Jesus said, **"Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist."** That's a pretty high accolade isn't it?

Until we were blessed with a grandson named Ethan I had no recollection that there were Ethans mentioned in the Bible - or that one of them had written Psalm 89. I don't think any of us remember *every* name that is mentioned in the Bible but I'm sure we all know who John the Baptist is. But *how much* do we know?

There isn't a continuous narrative in the Bible. He is dotted about the early chapters of the gospels - and in some old testament prophecies as well. Because of this, we need to do a bit of exploration and jumping about to build up a picture of John.

Our first jump is to Luke's gospel which, in chapter 1, tells us that John's birth was miraculous. He was born of elderly parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, who had been unable to have children (1:7) The angel Gabriel announced to Zechariah, a Temple priest, that he would have a son, saying, **"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 1:15-17) That's what Gabriel had to say.

Gabriel echoes the prophecy that God had given through Malachi, 430 years earlier, **"Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents,...."** (Mal 4:5-6)

If we look at v 13 -15 of today's reading we see that Jesus says **"For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came; and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. Let anyone with ears listen!"** (Mat 11:13-15)

So Malachi, Gabriel and Jesus all identify John with Elijah. But John the Baptist made it clear that he was not *literally* Elijah returning. We can read in John's gospel, that **when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him,Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not."** (Joh 1:19-21)

John is not a reincarnation of Elijah but Elijah typifies John the Baptist and John comes with the same spirit and power of Elijah which turned people's hearts and minds back to God.

John the Baptist was very clear that he understood his ministry to be an Elijah *type* ministry because he says, in John's gospel, **"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said."** (Joh 1:22-23)

John is making an almighty claim here. He is saying, “I am the one that Isaiah prophesied about. Jesus backed up what John had said as we see in v 10 of our reading today. Have a look, **“This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'**” (Mat 11:10)

Gabriel had told Zechariah, **“even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit,”** In Luke chapter 1 we learn that Mary, mother of Jesus, was related to Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist and that Mary went to visit Elizabeth. Luke tells us, **“When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb...”** and Elizabeth tells Mary, **“as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.”** (Luk 1:41-45)

So John's prophetic ministry began in the womb - the foetal prophet greeting the embryonic Messiah!

As a voice speaking in the wilderness we can see what a clear understanding John the Baptist has of Jesus' ministry.

Let's hink about three very important aspects.

First. John understood the eternal, divine nature of Jesus because he said, **“This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'”** (John 1:29-30)

Second. John's gospel tells us that when John, **“... saw Jesus coming toward him (he) declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”** From the outset John spoke of the sacrificial role of Jesus as Messiah – something

that, despite all that Jesus said to them, took a long time for the disciples to grasp.

Third. John understood Jesus' role as Judge of all the earth, as we heard in our first reading this morning. John said **“His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”** (Mat 3:12)

So John understood the the divine, eternal nature of Jesus. He understood the sacrificial role of Jesus to save us from our sin. He understood that there will come a time when, **“all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ”** (2Cor5:10)

And John didn't just have this amazing, Spirit given, understanding of who Jesus was, he made it his life's work to tell as many people as would listen to him.

So perhaps we can begin to understand why Jesus said of John, (have a look again at v11) **“Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist.”** But what did Jesus mean when he went on to say (still in v11), **“yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”**

To understand this we need to understand the historical setting of today's passage. Throughout Israel's history God had spoken to his people through his Prophets –Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah and a great many more up to Malachi. After Malachi – nothing..... Until John the Baptist.

Malachi's prophetic ministry finished about 430 years before John the Baptist came on the scene. 430 years of silence is a long time.

Now John stands on the boundary between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant that Jesus is bringing.

There are many Old Covenant Prophets who prophesy about Jesus, the coming Messiah, but none as clearly or within such imminent fulfilment as John the Baptist. This is why, up to that time, he was the greatest Prophet; he heralded the coming of the Messiah and the New Covenant.

And that is why the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. John's knowledge of the New covenant was great but our understanding is even greater because we are *partakers* of the New Covenant. We know about Calvary, we know about the Resurrection we know about the promise of a second coming, we know about the promise of a new heaven and a new earth. We are truly blessed.

So now the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John the Baptist. That means you and me!

We are not required to live in the desert, wear clothing of camel's hair and have a diet of locusts and wild honey - although you can if you like, I suppose. However, given that our understanding of Jesus surpasses that of John surpasses that of John the Baptist, should we should not also be looking for opportunities to tell others what the Spirit and Word of God has shown to us? There's a challenge for us.

In the bit of Matthew ch11 that we had read to us we heard what Jesus said about John but if we look to the beginning of the chapter from v 2 we see, "When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (Mat 11:2-3).

We have already seen that John clearly understood who Jesus was. And he was there when a voice from heaven said "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." (Mat 3:17) Having received so much, why then is John now asking these questions?

Well, let's think about the circumstances. John has been thrown into prison and has probably been there for some time. He is likely to have heard about the many of his countrymen who have rejected Jesus and his teaching. He may not yet have heard many reports about Jesus' ministry and may not have been sure about the reliability of what he has heard.

Jesus sent the message back (see v4), "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." (Mat 11:4-5)

Jesus doesn't rebuke John for his doubts just as, many hundreds of years earlier, *Elijah* was not rebuked when *he* was assailed with doubts but was gently restored.

Jesus is not critical of John's current discouragement, but praises him for his faithful ministry.

This should encourage us. However much we have received from God there may be times when we have questions, uncertainties, and doubts. Jesus will take us as we are if we come to him saying, "I believe, help me in my unbelief." Isaiah prophesied and Matthew's gospel confirms, "a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench" (Isa 42:2-3) I find that really comforting – I hope you do too

If we look down towards the end of this morning's reading to vv 16 and 17 Jesus said, "But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.'

Our generation is no different. There are many who want us to dance to their tune. And there are many who want Jesus to dance to their tune.

They want a Jesus who doesn't challenge our ideology, our lifestyle, our sin. A Jesus who doesn't call us to repent. A Jesus who is mild, tolerant and inclusive of all persuasions and ideologies. Anything else is considered by our culture to be unloving.

Garth Hewitt wrote a song about the teaching of Jesus where the chorus goes,
How easy to take what he said,
And shuffle the words 'til they're dead,
How easy to take out the sting,
Leave a saccharin saviour who is wearing a grin

But this is not the real Jesus. It is not the Jesus for whom John was sent out as a messenger to prepare the way, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Mat 3:2 and urging, "Bear fruit worthy of repentance."

It is true that the love that Jesus has for us, and has shown for us, is greater than any love shown by any other person. But it is not a love that is tolerant and inclusive of all persuasions, all ideologies and shrugs at sin. It is a love that has come to lead us to repentance and to **save us** from our sin.

In John ch 8 we can read how Jesus showed gentleness, love and forgiveness to a woman caught in adultery. His final words to her were, "Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

The gentleness, love and compassion of Jesus is directed to lead us away from sin and to save us from it.

Our Generation plays different tunes that they want Jesus to dance to. Many would prefer saccharin saviour who is wearing a grin.

What about us?

Our reading this morning finishes with the words, “Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”

Instead of wanting Jesus to dance to our tune we are wise if we learn to dance to his tune, listen to his teaching, follow his word.

And that is the message that was proclaimed by John the Baptist.