

The Birthday of John the Baptist

24th June 2018

John is an immensely important character in the Gospels. Mark, after announcing that he is writing the Good News of Jesus Christ, plunges into an account of the ministry of John. Luke, in a rather more sophisticated way, gives us parallel accounts.

He begins with an angel appearing first to announce the birth of John, then to announce the birth of Jesus; the follows an account of Mary making a visit to her cousin Elizabeth. The follows the birth and circumcision of John follows, in much more detail the birth and circumcision of Jesus.

But it is significant what the angels tells John's father, Zechariah. He tells him that this child will possess the power and spirit of Elijah and that he will reconcile fathers and children. (Luke 1:17). In choosing these words the angels is quoting from an Old Testament Prophet, Malachi, And Malachi was prophesying what would take place before the day of the Lord came. The day when God would intervene in his world in the interests of justice and righteousness. (Malachi 3:1 and 23). The clear implication is that that time is about to arrive with John the Baptist.

What is significant about Mary's visit to Elizabeth is the conversation that takes place between them. Elizabeth acknowledges the importance of Mary's unborn child with the words,

'Blessed are you among women,
and blessed is the fruit of your womb.' Luke 1:43

You might like to know that when these words are combined with the words of the angel, 'Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee' we have most of the content of the Hail Mary.

And Elizabeth's words are reinforced by the action of the unborn John the Baptist:

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting,
the child leapt in her womb. Luke 1:41

Luke records all this to make the point that although John the Baptist may be a mighty figure, he is less than Jesus - and he knew it before he was born!

There is very little about John's birth, except the strange affair of his name. Elizabeth says that he is to be called John. Now Zechariah has been unable to speak for nine months and so perhaps her family and friends suspect that she is trying to pull a fast one on Zechariah. So much so that they get him to write his response on a writing tablet. And to their amazement he writes that the child is to be called John. The meaning of names was important in those days and the name that Zechariah and Elizabeth agreed on had a very specific meaning: God's gracious gift. And so those around him began to ask the question, 'what will come of this child?'

Luke 1:66

We hear no more of John's childhood although Luke includes this apparently throw away remark: 'he lived in the desert.'

Luke 1:80

It is couple of chapters further on in Luke's gospel and thirty years later in real time that John reappears. But he reappears again in the desert; Luke does not mention this but Matthew tells us that he wore a camel hair skin and a leather loin cloth. (Matthew 3:4) And these details matter. Prophets preached in the desert or the wilderness. And the prophet Elijah wore came skin and leather. These details reinforce the allusion made by the angel to Malachi and show the conviction of the early gospel writers that John the Baptist is in the line of OT prophets and is the one who will come before the coming of the Lord.

And lest there be any doubt, the first words quoted by Luke are from Isaiah Chapter 40 where God promises to comfort his people who have been oppressed by other nations for centuries.

'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 3:5

But Luke reports an interesting little snippet:

A feeling of expectation had grown among the people who were beginning to wonder whether John might be the Christ.

Luke 3:15

Here is the slightest hint that in popular feeling, John and Jesus were often confused. We know from Luke that John had disciples; we also know that Jesus taught the disciples what we now know as the Lord's prayer in response to his own disciples request

Lord, teach us to pray as John taught his disciples

Luke 11:2

And so a picture emerges of two charismatic leaders with groups of disciples. And both teaching in a place and time which was expecting the Messiah. Small wonder, then, that some thought John was the Christ.

But we know that he was not. And in fact we might say that John was the last of the Old Testament Prophets. In once sense he has to be, even though he appears only in the New Testament - because he predates Jesus - albeit by only six months. But his message is very clearly that we need to prepare for the coming of the Lord. But Jesus has a different slant. According to Luke Jesus begins his ministry exactly as John does by quoting from the prophet Isaiah, this time chapter 61:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to

the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

Luke 4:18

But he follows the quotation by a very significant interpretation:

Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Luke 4:21

In other words John looks forward to the coming of God; but Jesus embodies the coming of God.

And this difference becomes crucial as the Christian church expands.

Luke, in writing Acts, records an incident where Paul visits Ephesus where he meet some disciples.

"Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They replied, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." Then he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They answered, "Into John's baptism." Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus." On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Acts 19:2 - 5

And this highlights an important distinction in the stages of Christian growth. There is a negative stage and a positive sate. there is a time for repentance. And there is a time for being filled with the Holy Spirit. There is a time for John and a time for Christ. But the times do not necessarily follow in a chronological way. There are many times in our lives for reflection, reassessment, pruning; there are many times in our lives for growth. And perhaps you might like to ask your self this question: what is God doing in your life at the moment ?

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St Margaret only