

Chester Cathedral Sermon by Canon Chris Humphries

11.30am Sung Eucharist, Sunday 5.12.2010

Theme: The prophetic message of John the Baptist

Readings: Isaiah 11 v 1 – 10

Matthew 3 v 1 – 12

My eldest daughter Sarah is a dedicated sports fan like her father. She is delighted that BBC Sports Personality of the Year is to be screened from Birmingham this year because it's just down the road from where she lives. So she and her husband have bought tickets and will be interested to see how the great British public rates its sporting stars this time around. Apparently the jockey Tony McCoy is the hot favourite for the individual title. But others are in with a shout : Jessica Ennis, Tom Daley, Lee Westwood, Graham Swann, who will attract the most votes?

Its interesting to consider what makes people popular and famous. (PAUSE)

Of course, such is the power of the media today that its entirely possible to be a well-known celebrity for not much reason at all. A well-worn track for those whose star is on the wane is to sign up for "I'm a celebrity, get me out of here" where you spend hours with other similar former or lesser celebrities in the Australian jungle, a sort of trial by Television that usually involves eating various beetles and bugs, and being crawled over by ominous looking spiders and creepy crawlies. The participants during this series have included Linford Christie, Britt Ekland, Dom Joly, Nigel Havers and the singer Stacey Solomon, very obviously an Essex girl, (I speak as an Essex man). What is this present cult of celebrity all about? What fascinates us so much?

Now as far as I know John the Baptist wasn't a leading light in the Israeli Cricket or Athletics team, though I do have a hunch that he would have been a decent marathon runner. I don't think he took part in X factor equivalent of those times. He was not noted for his singing. But he was popular...and unpopular in certain quarters ... which of course led to him losing his head, but also meant that he made an impact so great that we focus on him every Advent, every year.

Yes, John was a crowd puller ... popular, but not as we know it.

The crowds didn't come out for his autograph. (PAUSE)

Why did they flock to the Jordan river ?

First, they came to hear John **preaching**.

John's message was different to anything they'd ever heard. To begin with, the message was the man – you'd only to look at John to feel challenged. He was a wild figure, coat of camel's hair, zealous and ascetic in the tradition of the prophets. Bold, fearless.

Yet his preaching emphasized two particular strands to be found in the writings of the Old Testament prophets. Strong on God's judgement, words that wouldn't go down well in our liberal society: "You brood of Vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

But together with the fiery words comes the most amazing invitation and call to the people, the ordinary men and women:

"Come and be baptized, to show that you turn from your sins.

Come and be washed, forgiven. This is the moment for a new start."

The time was right. It was God's moment. And the people poured down to the Jordan in wonderful numbers – well, for the authorities, worrying numbers!

Why did they come?

First, John's preaching – prophetic but new.

Second, his **prompting and prodding**.

You see he didn't expect his hearers just to listen. He expected them to respond and to act. A good sermon will teach but it will also exhort. We need to learn more about our faith, but we also need to align our lives with God's will, to pray "Lord, make me more like Jesus".

So John's prompting on one level was to urge folk to undergo a religious ceremony – albeit in the open air, literally down by the riverside. But in Luke's version of this gospel passage, John also exhorts and directs the people to ground their faith, to cash it out in real terms. "If you've got clothes and others have none, then share – that's God's way."

"If your job places you in a privileged position, such as a soldier or a tax collector, don't use your position to take advantage of others."

And today we can be tempted by just as many widely accepted, yet godless ways of going about things. Pilfering at work, untruthful tax returns, convenient white lies – doesn't hurt anyone, everybody does it don't they?

But its **wrong** and whenever it happens we know in our hearts that it makes it harder to go the **right** way. It blurs the edges and makes our faith fuzzy, (*SLOWER*) fickle, flat.

The Common Worship baptism ceremony that we use now talks a lot about light and darkness, about Christians standing out as different, distinctive. It talks about a battle and fighting against sin valiantly. All of this ties in absolutely with John the Baptist's message. Still it rings true. It doesn't pussyfoot around.

"Believe, be baptized, shine out for God. Then the world can be changed."

Back to John.

Just at the moment of his greatest popularity John pulls another surprise.

Celebrity status is his for the taking, but he's having none of it.

Preaching, prompting and now **pointing**.

Pointing away from himself and towards the one who is to come. "I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

This was John's greatest prophetic task and he carried it out to the letter. (*SLOWER*)

He got in the way, he pointed the way, and he got out of the way.

The stage was set for the Saviour.

And us? Can the wild man crying in the wilderness touch our hearts too?

Of course. Because John draws people back to the basics of a faith that is alive.

Come to God as you are. No façade, no pretence.

Admit your need, confess your sin. Desire to go God's way, want to be God's person.

Receive his forgiveness, his indwelling and life-rearranging Spirit. (*PAUSE*)

With all of this happening of course we'll be different –

At peace with God – growing in love.

Such a person at one level is just an ordinary believer.

But such believers in John's time were then ready for Jesus to take centre stage.

And that's what Advent and the coming of Christ is all about.

Prepare we in our hearts a home where such a mighty guest may come.

Maranatha. Come Lord Jesus.