

## **It's not all about me**

Readings: Isaiah 43:1 – 7, Luke 3:15 – 22

Seven years ago I went to visit my cousin and her husband in England. At that time they were pastoring a church – rather it was a congregation within an existing Anglican church. The congregation they pastored met in a school hall. The congregation was growing - people were coming to Christ, being discipled and reaching out to others.

A bit less than four years ago Kevin and I stayed with my cousins again. They were no longer pastoring this congregation. You see the church that had given birth to this thriving congregation had become afraid. The leaders became controlling and stifled the growth that was happening. They viewed the congregation and my cousins as a threat.

John the Baptist is a fantastic example of the exact opposite of that particular church in England. I want to suggest he was able to fulfil his role in paving the way for Jesus for three reasons:

1. John knew who he was
2. He knew who Jesus was
3. He understood his place within God's plan

So let's look at John for a bit:

We know that John was born to Zechariah and Elizabeth an elderly couple. Zechariah was a priest and Elizabeth a cousin to Mary, Jesus' mother. She was also from the priestly line. , Scripture tells us:

Together they lived honourably before God, careful in keeping to the ways of the commandments and enjoying a clear conscience before God. But they were childless because Elizabeth could never conceive, and now they were quite old.

They would have been heart-broken about not having children. In those days not conceiving was considered a sign that God wasn't happy. It was a disgrace. (Today there are many choices, though infertility still brings heartbreak and major stress to couples.)

From the beginning there was a close link between John and Jesus. John's birth, like Jesus', was foretold by an angel. Read the story later in Luke chapter one. When Mary visited Elizabeth, within her womb John got all excited.

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby in her womb leaped. Lk 1:41

Elizabeth recognised what God was doing with Mary though others completely misunderstood. She commends Mary for believing what the Lord said he would do through her. Lk 1:45

So John came from a line of Godly heritage. That heritage gave a solid foundation to be a rebel and to step aside from the prescribed roles society might have had for him.

Even John's name was a sign of his rebellion. Normally he would have been called Zechariah, but God didn't want John to follow the norm.

John was a rebel, not against God, but against the society in which he lived. That society was very like ours – lots of freedom to pursue whatever you want.

And yet, like ours, there was a lot of pressure to conform to the norm of material wealth and prestige in society. And, just like today, most people didn't have a show of every being wealthy or respected in society.

As he grew up, John knew who he was. He knew he was chosen, and loved, by God. What's more the neighbours knew something was up too. "What will this child turn out to be?" they asked at the time of his birth. Luke 1:66

Through the early days of John's life, he was aware that his identity was in God. His parents taught him, the rabbis taught him and the Spirit of God taught him. He knew the world he lived in was a mess but that whatever befell him as an individual, he was called by God to participate in changing things.

John grew up, healthy and spirited. He lived out in the desert until the day he made his prophetic debut in Israel. Luke 1:80

But he was not the one who would bring about the change. He couldn't do that. His cousin Jesus was the only one who could initiate a new kingdom.

As John understood who he was, he also understood who he wasn't; what he wasn't to do. John knew his job was to point to Jesus –trying to save the world was out of his league. He didn't have the authority from God for that.

John knew who Jesus was. Sure Jesus was his cousin, but Jesus was also his Saviour and the Saviour of the whole world.

This was why when Jesus came to John to be baptised, John wasn't keen. Why? He knew that Jesus was far greater than he would ever be. He knew Jesus was the Son of God –

John was a son of God – that was what enabled him to follow his calling. But he wasn't the Son of God – only Jesus could ever be that person. Only Jesus could ever be the Messiah – the one who saves.

As John matured, he grew more into the role the Lord had for him. He became more confrontational and more humble at the same time.

Humble – because he knew it was the Lord who gave him the strength to be the prophet he was called to be.

Confrontational – for the same reason. It didn't matter what people thought of him; he was obeying God.

Preparing the way for Jesus meant John needed courage to point out stuff that was wrong in people's lives. They needed to see their need for salvation – their need for the Messiah!

So John welcomes lovingly those who have come to get right with God. Yeah right!

The Message puts it like this:

“Brood of snakes! What do you think you're doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to deflect God's judgment? It's your life that must change, not your skin. And don't think you can pull rank by claiming Abraham as 'father.' Being a child of Abraham is neither here nor there—children of Abraham are a dime a dozen. God can make children from stones if he wants. What counts is your life. Is it green and blossoming? Because if it's deadwood, it goes on the fire.” Lk 3:7

John can say these things because he knows that being a Jew isn't enough. He has experienced already a life that comes from the inside and works its way out through the life that is lived.

John could tell the people how to live rightly – his examples are found in verses 11 – 14. But John couldn't judge them though he could be mighty stern. Nor could John grant forgiveness, a new life to them. That was Jesus' role.

So instead of getting too big for his boots John rightly points people to Jesus.

John answered their questions by saying, “I baptize you with water; but someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so much greater that I'm not even worthy to be his slave and untie the straps of his sandals. Lk 3:16

John goes on to warn them of the work Jesus will do.

Yesterday we buried Laurie McVicar. He was the widower of Marilyn McVicar, a lady beloved by many in this church. At the graveside, Laurie's son read a prayer called the Cowboy's Prayer. It talked about meeting the final judge in death.

John the Baptist wanted people to know that Jesus was their judge. I'm sure he was glad that was Jesus' responsibility was not his. It is Jesus who gets to say who is in and who is out.

I was talking with someone recently who was so worried about whether or not their children were saved. I used to worry too – not just about my children. I'd really worry about anyone I'd have to take a funeral for. "Where have they gone Lord; are they with you?" Like John, I am just so pleased that Jesus is the final judge – not me, and I can trust him to make perfect decisions.

John was an amazing guy – he knew

1. Who he was
2. Who Jesus was
3. Where he fitted in God's scheme of things

Even though he thought he wasn't worthy even to be Jesus' slave Jesus said there was no greater prophet who ever lived. Luke 7:28

John fulfilled the plans the Lord had for him. And like Jesus, he got to die for the privilege.

The knowledge John had was a combination of head and heart knowledge. We often separate the two but we actually can't. Both are essential. When it comes to our walk with Christ, we need to understand as much as we can and we need to experience as much as we can.

I doubt the leaders of the church my cousins were involved in really knew who they were called to be. They thought they were there for themselves instead of paving the way for Jesus. As a result they were insecure. Instead of rejoicing over the success of a congregation, they stifled it.

Do you know who you are? Do you know in your head and your heart, in your 'knower' that God loves you so much, that Jesus has chosen you? Do you know who Jesus is and that he has come to bring you life in all its fullness? Do you know what part he has called you to play in growing his Kingdom; in your part of the world?

I imagine Jesus is telling some of the angels right now that there is no greater mother, father, tech guy, teacher, grandparent, gardener, pray-er, peace-maker, reconciler – whatever you are called to do to co-operate with God in building his Kingdom– there is none greater than you in God's Kingdom.

Provided that is, that you are co-operating with the Lord and not doing your own thing in your own strength. That would be just silly!