

HOMILY FOR WEDNESDAY 24TH JUNE – THE FEAST OF THE BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

Today the church marks the feast of the birth of John the Baptist. In the city of Florence, which has John as its patron saint, the streets would usually be thronged with crowds this evening. Crowds of locals and tourists flocking to the riverbanks to watch a lavish firework display laid on by the city authorities. In his own day crowds also flocked to the riverbanks, to listen to John and to be baptised by him there.

John stands before us, an intriguing transition of a man, in an occupied nation. Distant Caesar's power was administered by his local Roman Prefect, Pontius Pilate and their appointed Jewish political ruler, Herod. The religious authority was held by the house of Annas, a third element in the tense power dynamic of the time. John was born into this very real, complex, and as the close of his story highlights, dangerous even lethal context.

To note this is helpful I think if we are to consider how God's call to John might help us understand God's call to us in our day. What can we learn from John's response to God as we live in the complex realities, the joys and challenges of life and work?

Imagine for a moment how things might have seemed if you had been John's chief advisor.

With the hawkish authorities always surveying the landscape for potential flashpoints one temptation might be to suggest that John keeps a bit more of a low profile; 'stay out in the desert John, everyone loves all that mystical stuff which disturbs nothing and causes no risky waves'.

But even from the wilderness John's voice carries and people come to seek him out.

'On the other hand, now that you have the attention of the crowd, remember to keep them sweet, tell them what they want to hear...that opening line "You brood of vipers!"...you might want to re-think that a little...who wants to be told to repent, to change their whole direction of travel in life?.

But something about the authenticity of John's message from God, which spoke to the human longing for our lives to have meaning and purpose and which connects with our longing for our home in God, caused the crowds to ask 'what then should we do?' John's message, the call to a reorientation of priorities cuts through. The buzz of expectation rises: could this be the longed-for Messiah?

As John's advisor the logical next step might be to advise him to capitalise on this moment – this could be the tipping point. 'John you've got people talking, even Royalty are intrigued by you, now is your chance to seal the deal, to make good on this, to cement your profile.'

But at this very moment John does something that is completely unexpected. You might want to look again at verses 15 and 16 of Luke Chapter 3. Just as the expectant attention of the crowds is on him John redirects their gaze elsewhere, to someone else altogether, to Jesus. It's a strange choice, a disastrous career move. Unless that is one has spent deep time with God and come to understand one's essential identity and purpose and the arc of one's life.

John's willingness to allow God to shape, transition and change him stands in contrast to a fragile brittleness of worth, identity and meaning which can have such devastating results for individuals and communities. The on-line term 'hater', as in 'haters are gonna hate', is used to describe those who feel anger or jealousy towards someone who is doing well. We see for ourselves the impact of jealousy and envy which are so tragically rooted in the belief that if someone else succeeds I am

diminished. That haunting acidic fear of the success of others, based on an abiding and absurd sense of scarcity, serves to do nothing but rob us of joy and breed prejudice.

Perhaps we can find another way, a way that is better for all of us, the way of John, of Jesus and the apostle Paul who reminds us to 'rejoice with those who rejoice and to weep with those who weep' (Romans 12:15).

What might this better way look like? How might we walk in it?

It might include proactively looking for opportunities to direct the spotlight on someone else's endeavours. It might mean using our success or our privilege to open space, especially restricted space for others who don't have such easy access. It might include being careful to take time to keep in touch with what others are doing, to scan the horizon outside of ourselves, in order to celebrate with others. It could also mean being clear about real disadvantages and inequalities which hold us and others back and discerning what role we might have in addressing or mitigating those. It might involve doing some internal work with God about the roots of jealousy, insecurity or fear in our lives. It could include weighing the consequences of envy and the benefits of gratitude.

So now, in the middle of this week, on the feast day of John the Baptist, with whom could we celebrate, whom could we lift up, create space and opportunity for, before the week comes to a close? It could be a fun secret experiment; it might even turn into a way of life. And if it could turn into a way of life for us as individuals, might it also become a way of life for us as a Church, as a society?