

A Weirdo from the Wilderness: John the Baptist jump-starts Jesus

Genesis 1:1-5 Acts 19:1-7 Mark 1: 4 – 11

You may have looked over your garden at some stage of its life and declared it a ‘wilderness’ - or worse, had someone else so describe it –

There is, however, a perfect response. You can always declare it a natural wildflower flower garden, even if the flowers are on the chives and gone-to-seed silver-beet as is currently the case with us.

Wilderness is not the equivalent of desert of course. The wilderness of John the Baptist was a truly harsh environment where only the hardiest of plants grew and the animals all had about them the lean and permanently hungry look of the wild predator. We shouldn’t be too horrified by a diet of locusts and wild honey.

Rich in protein and energy, both could be described as convenience foods, useful for a nourishing snack.

Perhaps if our culture was transplanted to John’s wilderness you could drive your donkey to the hole in the rock and order your McLocust and honey burger on special for just 3 denairi – the one great advantage being that it would never increase your weight.

John, alas, had to find more prosaic and time-consuming methods of finding and preparing his wilderness food in an environment where anything that moved or grew was a potential contribution to a meal.

We should also dismiss the artist’s vision of a camel hair t-shirt slung over one shoulder and little more than a wide leather belt as clothing for John. The Tarzan-type baptist is far removed from the reality of those times. Perhaps the Justin Bieber model favoured by today’s teens would on the other hand be too pale and skinny a reflection of the real John the Baptist.

John was a man with a message. He may have learned his theology from the Essene Community; a group of serious aesthetic scholars who sought to maintain the purity of their faith by developing a life far away from the interest of the Roman conquerors and who may well be the ones who so carefully hid the Dead Sea scrolls.

John and Jesus would have known each well from childhood days and were likely close friends. How interesting to have sat in on their discussions as they pondered the life of their nation and considered the call of God upon them.

There were always wandering preachers and prophets concerned for the spiritual welfare of the people – indeed several are identified as being contemporary with John and Jesus. Other less friendly groups sought by armed intervention to harry the Romans and liberate their country by force.

One of the key factors that made both John and Jesus different was that they saw far beyond the boundaries of Israel’s concerns, recognizing that however they sought freedom from Roman oppression true freedom lay deeper in the spiritual issues that made for true liberation. John called for a transformation of attitudes with a new purpose to bring a vital quality of life; he recognized the need of people to receive and share forgiveness, to learn the power of love, to dream beyond their boundaries of culture and social class, to face the possibilities of profound change. He saw how traditions could cripple lives, so called on the

baptised to discover the liberation of grace.

John reinforced his message by a public and physical act to demonstrate a new commitment to turn life in a different direction. In a community where status and opportunity was almost totally determined by birth, John challenged that tradition, preparing the way for Jesus to call together a new community not based on the bondage of inherited status but on choosing to belong in a new and unbound community free to develop without hindrance the full potential possible.

This is a message the Church has always struggled to hear. Too much of its history has been marked by the imposition of new bondages, especially upon women, upon sexuality, and through the imposition of power.

Baptism symbolized a willingness to take the huge risk of becoming disconnected with the old structures to change to a new and unknown culture centred in the grace of God where all were equal in status where relationships were more valued than laws.

This was much more than turning over a new leaf or making a New Year resolution. This was revolutionary stuff and ultimately a serious challenge to an established order totally dependent on everyone knowing and keeping their place without question or at least without action.

In baptism we are a new creation open to insights unbound by the impositions of the past.

A word about the Anglican understanding of the doctrine of baptism.

First what it is not and does not do:

It does not 'make' you a Christian,

It is not designed to get rid of 'original sin' – a little more on this later -

It is not a passport to heaven.

So, what is baptism?

Baptism is a ritual involving the Church, the family and God that affirms a foundational truth of our faith. That is that prior to any action on our part the full love and grace of God is imparted to the one being baptised simply by virtue of being born into the human family.

Baptism therefore does not *confer* anything upon the person receiving it but *affirms* a profound truth already present. As the Church we admit the baptised into the family of the Church because God has already done so. Our human action reflects the divine. As the rubric states:

'Baptism is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.' Dare I add an unofficial rider 'affirmed by an outward and visible life'.

As to the age of the baptised – utterly irrelevant – this is primarily the action of God and is not ultimately dependent upon our response. However, response is important. The act of physical baptism is one of faith. It may be the faith of Grandma pressurizing the parents of the new-born or the deep personal faith of the parents and or godparents. The faith of the congregation and the priest and that of the whole Church is present also. Baptism is always a response to faith. At a later stage a person may re-affirm their baptismal vow in Confirmation or a special service for this purpose.

It is not possible to be 're-baptised' as it is an affirmation which once completed is eternal, so if anyone seeks to do it again or question the validity of your baptism on the grounds that as a babe you either slept through it or objected noisily then they have failed to understand the

awesome nature of God's grace. Perfect love cannot be improved upon. Neither is it relevant what denomination you were baptised through. Basic to our understanding is that baptism is into the Christian family, the Church of God, not into any division of it. As one baptised by a Presbyterian minister I am comfortable with this apparent contradiction as God loves even Presbyterians.

Which brings me to 'original sin'.

The idea is that because we inherit our state from our sin-contaminated parents we are 'born in sin' and it must be exorcised by baptism to give us a clean slate to begin with. It reflects a sad view of the inadequacy of God's grace which assumes the newly-baptised is doomed simply by being born unless some action of the Church takes it away. It's heresy and nonsense.

Oh! There were parental sleepless nights when I thought my babes were either full of original sin or had caught mine very early on, but we got over it. Of course we pass our attitudes and bigotries on to our children who very early develop an ability to imitate our actions rather than our aspirations but we can't blame 'original sin', as most of what emerges in our children seems far from original and all too familiar, with the same attraction for a new generation as it had for us.

What if you don't know whether you were baptised or not? Is St. Pete going to look through the records and turn you down because somewhere along the way you missed out? Don't worry – your passport to eternal life is the totally unconditional love of God, not a document signed by your Vicar – or minister as in my case.

True baptism is of the heart.

The outward and visible is not what's critical but God's gift of the inward and spiritual grace. However, if in doubt, baptism is a beautiful experience to re-affirm your faith and confirm you in the family. The oldest person I baptised was 76, so it's never too late.

Last year I re-planted the herb garden by our Opportunity Shop and sowed sweet peas and sunflowers in the background. They were slow appearing and slower growing. I jabbed the fork into the ground and found it iron-hard, so dug deeply and carefully to free up the soil. Soon everything began to thrive and produce the glorious colours and fragrances so enjoyed by everyone.

That's really what John the Baptist did. He came in his weird clothes, brought his potent message of transformational change baptizing them in the Jordan as a witness to their commitment; in so doing he dug the ground for Jesus. He was greatly admired for his ministry and attracted a devoted following but took great care not to allow himself to be exalted. In John's society honour was of vital importance, so everyone grasped the opportunities that arose to enhance it. For a leader and a teacher to turn honour down was unheard of, so folk would have been amazed to hear John say:

“There is one coming - yes even among you now - whose sandal I am not worthy to unloose!” When Jesus appeared before him he cried out:

“Look! - the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”

As the word from today's Epistle reminds us, the baptism of John had far-reaching effects

enabling this little group in Ephesus some 30 years after their baptism to continue as believers. Frankly I don't think Paul needed to baptise them with the suggestion that John's lacked something essential in itself. Certainly they needed to be brought up to date on their relationship with Jesus but this would have been sufficient.

Back to the Wilderness. These harsh and demanding environments have about them an awe that can be quite hypnotic. With less of life's luxuries we are freer to engage our minds on weightier issues. With fewer distractions the spirituality of life is easier to link in with. Of course our personal wilderness encounters can be lonely and painful. They can force to the surface issues we'd rather leave buried. The wilderness tests and proves our relationships – one way or the other. The very starkness around us may clarify important decisions empowering us to make them for our very survival as whole people. We can see how we love ourselves, how we interact with others, how we need to re-organise priorities.

What's more we too can emerge from the wilderness refreshed by a basic diet, heads blown through with desert winds, dressed for the journey before us and most importantly bearing a new message of self-care and other-love to challenge our old ideas and inspire those around us. We can walk the waters of our baptism of change and lead others through also. In the paradox of our faith we give ourselves to the ministry of Christ to discover the real meaning of freedom.

Those first words of the Bible – 'In the beginning God created----' become for us a forerunner to our new beginning in which God re-creates us as a visionary people primed for empowering action for a new year.

As you come up for your Communion today you might like to pass by the font and dip your hand into the water which has been blessed for the purpose of reminding us of the strong sacramental link. A reminder of your baptism may add to your sense of holiness in Communion.

Let's ever be thankful for the foundations of earlier years, the heritage of faith and our own experience of being God's people. Is it too much for us to dream of a year different from past ones, a year in which we are bold and courageous, wise yet willing to risk moving beyond the familiar to take on a new challenge, to meet new people, form new relationships, discover new adventures?

Let's dig our gardens folks – who knows what wild and wonderful growth will burst into life!