

**SERMON PREACHED AT ST ANDREW'S WALKERVILLE, SUNDAY DECEMBER
17, 2017. ADVENT 3. JOHN THE BAPTIST**

You could say that he blew in out of the desert like a whirling whooshing dervish. They had never seen anything like this before. Their whole nation had not seen anything like this for hundreds of years – not since the wild-looking prophets had also whirled and whooshed around Israel and Judah. I mean ... the man was dressed badly ... camel's hair and a leather belt ... hardly according to the dress regulations set down in the law. And his diet ... I ask you ... locusts and wild honey. And what he said ... hardly polite ... criticising just about everyone. And what he expected them to believe ... someone more powerful than he was coming ... unquenchable fire ... Lamb of God. I tell you, John the Baptist made quite an impression.

John the Baptist wanted the nation to get ready for the more powerful person who was coming after John had done his work. John preached axes and fire. But the more powerful one would bring *unquenchable* fire. This made people stop and listen. This made people come to him to be immersed in water – to be baptised as we would say – and those people were told by John to change their ways, to make themselves ready. John had come to teach, to baptize or immerse, and to nurture new believers.

John had come to immerse people in water. The Jewish religion is not much interested in making converts. If a person decides that she or he wishes to embrace Judaism and become a member of that religion, then Judaism will embrace them. But there are no huge public evangelistic rallies of the Billy Graham sort that help to convert you. In the Old Testament, if you became a convert to Judaism ... a "proselyte" ... there were three – or two – things you had to do. One – to be circumcised if you were a male. Two – to offer sacrifices. Three – to be immersed in water as a ritual washing – a ritual cleansing of all the wrongs of the past. This immersion in water was called a *tevilah* ... it was what we would call a baptism – a ritual washing. ... A river would do ... a lake would do. And also there are special tanks built – rather like a plunge pool – and they are called *mikveh* – for this public full immersion. John the Baptist took this well-known Jewish ritual for proselytes and gave it a new meaning. John seems to have performed baptism / washing / ritual cleansing for the remission of sins, in place of the rites of purification and sin offerings that were held in the temple.

As our Advent wreath hymn said this morning,
"John the Baptist, by his preaching and by water poured,
brought to those who heard his teaching news of hope restored:
'Keep your vision strong and steady, and be ready for the Lord.'

Here we are, well into the season of Advent. If someone like John the Baptist came and disrupted our normal Sunday liturgy we would be very upset. If someone came and preached in the way that he preached, we probably would be up in arms. "Who does he think he is?" But the message that John came to bring is the message that rings out through all the season of Advent, through the readings, through the traditions, through the liturgy, through the history of the

Christian Church - - - all the way to 2017 and all the way to the closer north-eastern suburbs of Adelaide.

When John the Immerser saw Jesus approaching him, John said, "Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." (John 1:29). There was a direct connection between John who prepared the way for this Lamb of God, and Jesus who is the Lamb of God (as shown on the front cover of our pew sheet this morning). What John said Jesus would do, Jesus was about to do. *When the Jews saw and heard John the Immerser, they as it were saw and heard Jesus the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*

From our vantage point in Christian history we see more about Jesus than John ever saw. John saw Jesus laying the axe to the root of the tree ... John saw Jesus preaching with unquenchable fire, John saw Jesus who takes away the sin of the world. From our vantage point we see all that, and more. We see Jesus who is the loving gift of God to the world. We see Jesus who teaches the profound lessons of the Sermon on the Mount. We see and hear Jesus who still teaches us about the kingdom of God. We see Jesus who was crucified on Good Friday, was raised on Easter Day, and who has commissioned his followers to go into all the world to preach the gospel.

When people see and hear us today, they as it were see and hear Jesus who has done all these things. When people see and hear us today, they see us as the representatives of Jesus, who live Jesus' life in ours. And that's the enormous tragedy of the Royal Commission that handed in its findings two days ago. The love and grace of God and Jesus, and children, have all been let down so very badly by some of the people who claim to be his followers.

Like John the Immerser, we are those whose lives and words bear testimony to Jesus Christ. In some profound sense, our words are Jesus' words. In that profound sense, our actions are Jesus' actions. In that profound sense, our attitudes are Jesus' attitudes. Where will people these days see living, dynamic examples of Jesus? In us! Where will people these days see living, dynamic demonstrations of Jesus' love? In us! Where will people these days see living, dynamic manifestations of the true spirit of Christmas in all its depths? In us!

John the Baptist ... or John the Immerser ... is a paradigm for us of the quality and grace of the message of Jesus Christ. Far from being a far-off figure in Jewish history, John the Baptist is a present, still-effective ambassador for the message and the grace of Jesus Christ. On this "John The Baptist" Sunday for us at St Andrew's, let us remind ourselves that we too are current, contemporary ambassadors for the message and the grace of Jesus Christ. As John the Baptist's candle brings light into our Advent preparation, so may our candle bring light into the world we live in, and into the lives of the people we meet day by day.

(for a good explanation of the old Jewish ritual of *tevilah* or immersion or "baptism" as we would call it, see

<https://quakergirl.wordpress.com/2011/02/24/tevilah-jewish-water-baptism/>