

## John the Baptist

Isaiah 35:1-10;

The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.  
Like the crocus,<sup>2</sup> it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.  
The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendour of Carmel and Sharon;  
they will see the glory of the LORD, the splendour of our God.  
<sup>3</sup> Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way;<sup>4</sup> say to those with fearful hearts,  
“Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution  
he will come to save you.”  
<sup>5</sup> Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped.  
<sup>6</sup> Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.  
Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.  
<sup>7</sup> The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs.  
In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.  
<sup>8</sup> And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness; it will be for those who walk on  
that Way. The unclean will not journey on it; wicked fools will not go about on it.  
<sup>9</sup> No lion will be there, nor any ravenous beast; they will not be found there.  
But only the redeemed will walk there,<sup>10</sup> and those the LORD has rescued will return.  
They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads.  
Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

Matthew 11:2-11

When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples<sup>3</sup> to ask him, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?”

<sup>4</sup> Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see:<sup>5</sup> The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy<sup>[a]</sup> are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.<sup>6</sup> Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”

<sup>7</sup> As John’s disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind?<sup>8</sup> If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings’ palaces.<sup>9</sup> Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.<sup>10</sup> This is the one about whom it is written:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way before you.”<sup>[b]</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

**In the book we’re looking at in Advent groups** — ‘Walking backwards to Christmas’ — there is a line that grabbed Sarah’s and my attention. Anna (in Stephen Cottrell’s imagination) talks about needing to be in the temple because it is a *thing that is pointing to something else*, and she needs to be where it is, to see where it is pointing. When she meets Mary and Joseph with the baby Jesus, she finds what she was looking for, but not necessarily how the temple points to him. She doesn’t know, but we know, that the temple had to do with encountering God, and finding his forgiveness — and that that will be better done through Jesus.

John the Baptist is also a signpost, pointing towards Jesus and his coming. He announces that the messiah is coming, and that this is important, and that people had to do something about it. Two weeks ago I talked about how when people come to visit, you can clean and tidy with

one of two motivations — either you don't want them to judge you, or you want to make it nice for them. But one way or another you are likely to put the hoover round, and straighten the room.

John knows that the messiah is coming, and he knows this is important. And he sets about living like this is important, and communicating very directly about this. Turn around! Be baptised! You've got to change!

He is like an ancient Greta Thunberg — uncompromising in stressing the significance of the disaster approaching if there is no change made. Wake up! You're sleep walking into disaster! You have to change!

In Matthew 11, John is in prison because Herod Antipas was uncomfortable with John telling the truth about Herod's relationship with his brother's wife — there you go — uncompromising to the end! John still has followers of his own, and he sends them to Jesus to ask, 'are you the one?'

Jesus replies by quoting Isaiah 35 — our first reading — 'then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped.' Isaiah had been speaking in broadly prophetic imagery, but in Jesus it has come literally true — the most astonishingly real proof that he's the one.

It seems unlikely that John wouldn't have already known and understood that Jesus, his cousin, was the one. Why ask the question then? I think this is because he is a pointer, a signpost. He has spoken powerfully to Israel about the need for change, and that God's son is coming. Now he needs to direct his many fans towards the person they should really be following, Jesus. Hence the question — pointing his followers towards Jesus before his own death.

John the baptist is a hard sell in 21st century Britain. Jesus praises him as the greatest prophet, indeed the greatest *anyone*, but we don't like his direct tone — just as many people are put on edge by Greta Thunberg. Why do we still think about John during advent?

Perhaps, because he was right. Perhaps because of all the prophets he pointed most faithfully to Jesus. And perhaps, just as Stephen Cottrell says, we need to stand beside the pointer to see most clearly whom it is pointing to, and how to get there, and to see that Jesus is not only the direction, but also the way, the truth and the destination.

**Amen.**