

We have now come into the third Sunday of advent and have one more Sunday before we move into the Christmas week. Our theme for this morning's meditation is, "The message of John the Baptist." John was the first prophet after almost 400 silent years when there was no major prophetic activity. John's birth was foretold by the angel Gabriel to his parents Zachariah and Elizabeth who were both from priestly descent. Zechariah was a descendent from Abijah and Elizabeth from Aaron. When it was Zechariah's turn to offer incense in the temple he is met by the angel Gabriel who informs him that they would have a son and that he should be named John. Zechariah tells the angel that he and his wife were too old and therefore wondered how this could take place. Because of his unbelief Zechariah was told that he would remain dumb till the child was born. The name John or Yohanan means 'Yahweh has shown mercy'.

There are three outstanding things about John the Baptist. He was a **nameless prophet**, a **fearless prophet** and a **selfless prophet** (I am indebted to Dr Sam Kamaleson for these three titles). John was prophesied about by the prophet Malachi as the messenger who will prepare the way before the Lord's coming (Malachi 3:1). In Mark's gospel, Mark records John as the messenger who had come to prepare the way. He also fulfills the prophesy made by Isaiah about, 'A voice of one in the wilderness, "prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him."' So we see here that John was a **nameless prophet**. He was not interested in making a name for himself. He is primarily referred to as a **messenger** and as a **voice** calling in the wilderness. John's attitude of being nameless is a great challenge for each of us in our contemporary society. The world teaches us to make our name great, that everyone would recognize us and praise us. We are so often caught up in making a name for ourselves, whether we are pastors or lay people. We do not lift the name of Jesus higher. John's message shows us that we must be pointers to Christ and must prepare the way for his second coming.

Secondly, we see that John was a **fearless prophet**. He was a man of great courage and conviction. He called people to repent of their sins and turn back to God. He was not worried whether it was a king or people in high positions or ordinary people. He confronted King Herod Antipas about his adulterous relationship with his brother Philip's wife. He was able to do that because he himself led a holy life and had the moral courage to confront King Herod. This confrontation eventually leads to his death but John was not worried about that. He gave out a clarion call for people to repent of their sins and turn to Christ could be baptised. The strange thing was that baptism was a ritual for proselytes who came from other faiths and converted to Judaism. Here John was asking the very Jewish people to be baptized with the same initiatory ritual that was required of by the gentile converts. John was making it clear that pedigree did not matter in the kingdom of God and repentance and faith were the only way to entrance into the kingdom of God. John was a fearless prophet who confronted the king and people with the message of repentance. We too are challenged both to repent of our sins as well as to give a clarion call for others to repent.

Thirdly, we see John was a **selfless prophet**. John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and honey. His lifestyle was one of simplicity. He had just the bare essentials that were needed to keep him going. His message was, "After me comes he who is mightier than I the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." We see here again that John clearly humbles himself saying that he is not even worthy to stoop down and untie the sandals of the one who is to come. He gives no importance to his own self but is interested in lifting the name of Jesus higher. He says, 'I must decrease and he must increase.' He was a prophet who emptied himself of any unnecessary attention to himself. He wants people to see Jesus in his life and lead people to him. He is not concerned about all the work that he has done nor does he boast about it. So often we are caught up with our sinful selves and our desires that everything that we do revolves around ourselves. John's message teaches us that we must humble ourselves, forget ourselves and lift the name of Jesus higher.

Finally, John tells us that he was baptizing with water but the one who comes after him will baptize with the Holy Spirit. Water baptism remains at the level of the flesh an outward act of cleansing. Baptism of the Spirit is a promise of the out pouring of the Holy Spirit by God in the last days as seen in the prophet Joel. This is not just a hope of spiritual refurbishment but the active presence of God as a resident Spirit amongst those who believe in Jesus. Water and the Spirit is a reference to the Holy Spirit's work in our lives who cleanses us and renews us. The moment we receive Jesus as our Lord and Savior the Spirit comes and dwells with in us.

This morning the message of John the Baptist calls us to be nameless people who will work for the kingdom of God rather than for our own kingdoms and our own names. We are to be like the fearless prophet –having a prophetic voice in our society, confronting that which is evil and calling people to repentance. Finally, we are called to be selfless-not working for our good and our own sinful desires but rather to let the name of Jesus increase and our names decrease. May God help us to imbibe the message of John the Baptist to be a nameless prophet, fearless prophet and selfless prophet in our lives.