

SERMON FOR 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
15.7.18  
ALL SAINTS CHURCH, BIRKENHEAD  
Rev Jordan Greatbatch

It is somewhat appropriate that we had baptisms the other week on the feast of John the Baptist. Today's reading also recounts a story of John but has a rather more violent and lifeless nature to the reading which may seem in complete contrast to the peaceful and life giving nature of baptism. It is these sorts of contrasts that are in fact present in the world of the Christian faith, for our experiences as people of faith are often hard as well as joyful, lonely as well as communal. It is these very contrasts I would argue, that make the Christian life so rich, and today's is certainly a rich story. It

is a cauldron of seduction, political ambition, scandal and murder, which has provided countless inspiration for artists from Titian to Oscar Wilde. It is somewhat of a 'passion narrative' and has very similar overtones to the death of Jesus. Herod Antipas and Pontius Pilate have much in common. Both look favourably upon their captives, who are prominent religious figures. Each wants to spare the life of their prisoners but both care more about pleasing the crowd than exercising justice, and finally both victims' bodies are recovered by their disciples and laid in a tomb. There is no doubt that Mark wants to frame John's death in this way, highlighting that both John and Jesus' deaths were the consequence of their lifestyle and teaching.

John however is not Jesus, as Herod may have thought. John was not the messiah, but the messenger, and an important one at that. He is known as John the Baptizer – the one who baptised Jesus in the river Jordan, the one who called all people to repentance sealed in the act of being covered with water. The act of baptism is hard to trace in terms of origin, there were such cases of baptism in Jewish writing for Gentile converts to Judaism. And there is speculation among scholars that John perhaps was a part of the Qumran community which practised ritualised washing as a part of their religious practices. Whatever the case, John was doing something familiar yet radically different. He was calling Jews to repent, despite the fact that they were Gods chosen people. This would have been repugnant to many who saw

themselves as covenantal people who were right with God because of their ancestors. John also spoke out against the misuse of religious and political authority, no wonder he would later find himself in prison. John represents the prophetic side of Christianity that has always been present and which without the Church would be in dire straits. It is such voices that call people back to the heart of the faith, and reconnect us with the foundations of Christian living. John also represents to us the life of the baptised. Once we all make the decision to be baptised or have it made on our behalf, we enter in to God's family, with all its complexity and pain, joy and hope.

We can see this contrast of the baptised life in the two readings we had this morning. There is the lofty, ethereal

hymn of St Paul that talks of the cosmic Christ who fills the earth. It is written “With all wisdom and insight <sup>9</sup>he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, <sup>10</sup>as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.” Christ is the centre of all the cosmos, and now we are a part of this present and future hope and glory through our baptism. Then we have John the Baptist, living in the desert, wearing camel hair, eating honey and locusts and eventually been imprisoned and executed. The point here, is that both are our reality as those who are baptised into the name of The Trinity, we are equally clothed with Christ in to a hopeful and wondrous glory, but we also are called to the often difficult task of

been God’s people here on earth. In addition, I think a second point should be made that we are not all John’s, we simply cannot be. As Saint Paul declares in Ephesians 4:11 some are called as “apostles some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors, and some teachers,” we are to discern our place in Gods calling and live it out with all wisdom and understanding. As we celebrated the baptisms 2 weeks ago and are always remember our own, may we learn from both the images, one of our glorious inheritance in Christ, and the other the wilderness of John the Baptist.

They teach us that though life at times may be difficult, and the wilderness surround us, the promise is that we are clothed with the resurrected Christ and he is our strength and guide. No matter how bad things look.