

S.P.A.C.E.

Wednesday 16th September 2020

Jesus and John the Baptist

¹⁸ John's disciples told him about all these things. Calling two of them, ¹⁹ he sent them to the Lord to ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?'

²⁰ When the men came to Jesus, they said, 'John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"'

²¹ At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, illnesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. ²² So he replied to the messengers, 'Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy[▫] are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. ²³ Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.'

²⁴ After John's messengers left, 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? ²⁵ If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear expensive clothes and indulge in luxury are in palaces. ²⁶ But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ²⁷ This is the one about whom it is written:

"I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you."[▫]

²⁸ I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.'

²⁹ (All the people, even the tax collectors, when they heard Jesus' words, acknowledged that God's way was right, because they had been baptised by John. ³⁰ But the Pharisees and the experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptised by John.)

³¹ Jesus went on to say, 'To what, then, can I compare the people of this generation? What are they like? ³² They are like children sitting in the market-place and calling out to each other:

"We played the pipe for you,
and you did not dance;
we sang a dirge,
and you did not cry."

³³ For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, "He has a demon." ³⁴ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, "Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners."³⁵ But wisdom is proved right by all her children.'

Luke 7:31-35 is a reading from today's lectionary.



St John the Baptist *El Greco (c.1600)*
Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/>



The Wedding at Cana *Dom. Georges Sabet (1963)*
A fresco in the Abbey Church of Kerr Moussa, Dakar, Senegal
<https://curiouschristian.blog/>

Where would you expect to find an authentic Christian? Would you look in the wilderness, expecting to find an ascetic, upright character, a lean and lonely man who eschewed worldly pleasures and lived like a hermit? Or would you look among ordinary people enjoying good food and good company at a family celebration and helping the host to avoid an embarrassing practical problem for the host? Which type of Christian would you or I feel more comfortable with? Can both types of people be genuine followers of God, or neither?

In today's passage it seems that the Scribes (the "experts in the law") and Pharisees thought they knew the answer. They dismissed the abstemious John, the last of the old-style Jewish prophets, as a man who "has a demon". Yet Jesus, who was ready to share in and to relish the normal and innocent pleasures of his fellow men, was criticised by them as a "glutton and a drunkard". In their perversity the Scribes and Pharisees observed, judged and condemned both approaches, and missed what ordinary people - even the marginalised and disreputable like the tax collectors (v29) - had recognised.

In verses 31-35, differences between Jesus' and John's approach to ministry appear to be contrasted. Yet in reality both Jesus and John proclaimed Good News, both preached repentance, both spoke truth to power. But their contrasted approach highlights two important truths:

1. God tries to reach us in various ways, knowing how different we are.
2. Yet because we have free will we are capable of accepting or rejecting his plans for us.

God wants us **all** – the conventional and the unorthodox, the thoughtful introvert and the outgoing party animal, the scholarly and the charismatic, those we find likeable and those who we find hard to get on with. He wanted the Prodigal Son no more and no less than he wanted the Scribes and the Pharisees.

“But the Pharisees and the experts in the law rejected God’s purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptised by John.” (v30)

Two questions for us to ponder:

- How effective are we, as individuals and as a church, at reaching out to **all**, not just those like us or those who happen to be the currently-fashionable targets for outreach?
- How ready are we to find faults in others?

And two prayers:

Heavenly Father we thank you for the richness and variety of the world you have created, for different seasons and different scenery, for the contrasts between night and day, for the breath-taking range of plants and animals that inhabit the earth and especially for the diversity of humankind. Help us to celebrate difference and to learn from those whose tastes and talents are unlike our own. May we avoid the temptation of striving for uniformity and instead recognise and celebrate that each of us can reflect some part of you, the God in whose image we are all made, and who reaches out in different ways to each and every one of us. Amen

Heavenly Father help us to avoid prejudice towards people who are different from ourselves, whether in race, religion, gender, class or lifestyle, remembering all the harm that has been done by unthinking prejudice in the past and which we see around us today. We pray for the victims of prejudice who suffer humiliation and rejection and may fear for their lives. We pray for persecuted Christians, for people displaced by civil war, for refugees and asylum seekers - for all whose humanity has been denied because they are no longer seen as individuals, just as members of a currently disfavoured group. Amen

The next SPACE will be on Wednesday October 7th ...

...but there will be a change.

The reflection will still be available on line on the first and third Wednesdays but we are intending to hold SPACE in church once again and 9.00 am on Wednesday October 7th will be the first time. SPACE will resume in church using the same format as before lockdown, that is:

- a period of silent prayer, during which you may like to look at the reflection,
- some brief prayers,
- a simplified celebration of Holy Communion,
- finishing by 9.30.

Look out for further details on our website and on the weekly service sheets

We look forward to welcoming you to SPACE at St Mary’s.