



**Clifton Parish Churches**  
**Small Group Resources**  
**Advent 2021**

## **Week Two – John the Baptist – Linking Old and New**

### **Readings**

The lectionary readings for the Second Sunday of Advent are:

Malachi 3:1-4

(Luke 1:68-79 – the Benedictus)

Philippians 1:3-11

Luke 3:1-6

Unusually, there is no Psalm set for this week – the Benedictus effectively replaces it. As with the Psalm last week, you might want to try reading it in different ways.

## **John the Baptizer... A Figure from Israel's Past...**

John the Baptizer seems somehow to step out of the Old Testament and into the beginning of the New. With his camel hair clothing and his diet of locusts and wild honey (although we have these details from Matthew rather than Luke), he seems a disconcerting, slightly unnerving figure. He is sometimes talked about as 'the last of the Old Testament Prophets' and, while we need to be careful with this description, he does seem to have more in common with some of the Old Testament prophets than the figures we encounter in the New Testament.

Certainly, in one sense John links the Old and New Testaments. He is described as 'the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord!"' As the Gospels tell us, these words are from the book of Isaiah (chapter 40, verse 3, to be precise). Isaiah 40 (and the next fifteen or so chapters) are from the part of Isaiah known as Deutero- or Second- Isaiah, believed to have been written during the time that Israel was in exile in Babylon.

A curious thing happens to Israel both during and after the Exile. They come to believe that it is not just Israel themselves who have been exiled from God, but the whole of humanity. And even once the Exile is over and they're allowed to return and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, they continue to believe that they are, in

some way, still in exile (as are the rest of humanity). There is a sense, as the Old Testament period draws to a close, that a time will come when God will return and dwell fully with them – and not just with Israel but with all of humanity.

So when John appears on the scene, preaching a message of repentance and claiming that the salvation of God is at hand, the Gospel writers are telling us that the time of God's long-awaited return is drawing near. John the Baptizer, the Gospel writers tell us, is the coming herald who will point the way to the salvation which is to come – a salvation which will be for all humanity, not just for the people of Israel. A salvation which will see God dwell fully with his creation. A salvation – and an end of exile – which will come about because of Emmanuel; God with us.

You might like to watch this video for some background on Exile in the Bible:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xSua9 WhQFE>

## Some Questions

- 1) John the Baptizer appeared preaching a message of repentance to a world that was unaware that the Kingdom of God is near. He was preaching to a world that took the existence of God for granted. In our world today it seems there are many spiritual ideas floating around that are not really anchored in anything ('the universe is telling me...'). Is it helpful for us to start by preaching repentance as John did? If not, where do we start and why?
- 2) Although the coming of Christ comes to be seen by the early church as the beginning of the end of Exile (because Jesus is Emmanuel – God with us), there continues to be a sense that, until Christ comes again, and all creation is renewed, our return from Exile is not complete. What signs do you see that our exile – and the world's exile – is not yet fully over?
- 3) Like John, Jesus preaches that we should repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near. But Jesus invites us to join him in building that Kingdom 'on earth as it is in Heaven.' This is not about hastening the 'end of the world' but about the work of transforming the here-and-now of the world to more closely accord with God's vision for creation. Where do you see signs of God's Kingdom here on earth, and where do you see

signs that God's Kingdom is needed here on earth? How might you, as an individual/small group, get involved in working to bring about God's Kingdom 'on earth as it is in Heaven?'

- 4) Both John and Jesus call us to repent – to turn away from our sins. The Greek word for repent is *metanoia* and carries with it a sense of changing our mind in a such a way that it completely changes our way of life. Given this context, how might we, both as individuals and as a church, meaningfully demonstrate our repentance? To ourselves? To each other? To God?
- 5) John appears as 'one crying out in the wilderness.' Where do we see the wilderness in our own lives? In the lives of those around us? How can we be with others in their wilderness and, where necessary, make straight the paths that help lead them out of their wilderness?