

Mtt 3:1-12 Chad's 071225

Well here we are, a **week into the joyful anticipation of the Christmas season**. And what does our Gospel present us with?/ Well we come face-to-face with the **confronting figure and the challenging words of the prophet John the Baptist**!/ But surely this grim ranting character doesn't fit amidst all the preparations for the coming Christmas, does he ?/ You **won't find him as a figure in the nativity scene**, will you? John the Baptist, with his gaunt stark appearance, his dusty camel hair coat, reeking of locusts and honey, & smelling of poverty and desert discipline, is not one we can embrace easily ... literally or figuratively!/ and how many cards have you received depicting John the Baptist & his message?/ For I guess from our Gospel today such a card would say 'Greetings from our house to yours. Our thoughts of you at this time of the year are best expressed in the words of John the Baptist: 'You brood of vipers'! The axe is lying at the root of the tree; every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire! Merry Christmas and love from the Oake's !'(Mtt 3:7-10)/

Not the sort of greeting most would seek! By & large we would prefer the traditional depictions, ranging from the jolly overgrown elf figure of Santa Claus in his red red valour suit, complete with reindeers and the sleigh of gifts for those who already have too much, with the message of 'Merry Christmas' or 'Happy Holiday'; or even better the traditional baby Jesus in a manger surrounded by Mary, Joseph and the animals with the greeting of '**love, joy, peace, and hope**'!

Yet at this time all of the Gospels have no Santa Claus or even the baby Jesus, but John the Baptist at the beginning of their Christmas story! And the intent of the message is clear: **if you want to get to the Joy of Bethlehem, you must first meet John the Baptist at the Jordan**! If you really want to see what's in Bethlehem's manger, you

must first confront this crazy prophet in the wilderness. In short, no Jesus without John./ Not an inviting prospect, but there it is!/

Why is this? Well a look across the Gospels will help us to begin to understand why we must first encounter John the Baptist before we engage with the baby Jesus!

Matthew's Gospel for today (Mt 3:1-12) paralleled in Mark & Luke, focuses very early on the necessary preparation for the first & indeed every Christmas. Our Matthew Gospel begins with John the Baptist quoting Isaiah's words of **'Repent', or turn away from those self-centred things in your lives which are against God's law of love!**'. Then in Matthew, paralleled by Mark(1:7-8) & Luke (3:1-6), John the Baptist talks of preparing the way for Jesus, and proclaims John the Baptist's place in this preparation for Christmas when he says "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. **I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.**"

Jesus' Baptism will go beyond calling us to repent, then washing away those things in our lives that are against God's law of love. Jesus' baptism will ignite us with the spark of God's Spirit, empowering us to deliberately put 'the other' before self.

So the **John the Baptist's call to repentance & cleansing of our self-centredness are here the prerequisite to Jesus' empowering us with other-centredness./** And that is why we focus on John the Baptist every Advent and why Jesus trusts him and accepts his non-temple, offbeat nature ritual of cleansing in the baptism by water , while also going far beyond John the Baptist, by strengthening us with his baptism in the Spirit. And is an acknowledgement of **Jesus' message of empowerment, or baptism 'in the Spirit' which will bring us the real meaning of Christmas,** which is a giving of the

heart beyond the passing annual rituals of parties, presents & food once a year, to the ongoing reality of selfless sharing every day!

Richard Rohr remarks how closely John the Baptist models his call to submission of oneself to the other in his life journey of submission to Jesus. He says: This one born to the priestly temple class does his own thing down by the riverside; he is a man born into privilege who dresses like a hippie; he is a superstar yet he is willing to let go of everything. Upon creating his own following by water baptism he then says that what really matters is Jesus' baptism of "Spirit and fire"! He is a living paradox, as even Jesus says of him: "There is no man greater than John...but he is also the least" in this new reality that I am bringing about" (Matthew 11:11). And this is why John exits the drama very early. He has played his single and important part, and he knows it. His is brilliantly a spirituality of descent, not ascent for in John's Gospel John the Baptist reminds us that 'He must grow bigger while I must grow smaller" (John 3:30).

Rohr concludes: John learned to empty himself already as a young man, even before he even built his tower of success. His ego was out of the way, so much so that he could let go of his own ego, his own message and even his own life. Indeed it has been suggested that this is surely the real meaning of his head on a platter! A bit extreme we might think. But there it is, we are to focus not on ourselves but the other.

Some have cleverly said that ego is an acronym for "Edging God Out." We're to practise humility. As we prepare for Christmas we're to practise letting go, which gradually lets God in.

So as we attend to our preparations for the celebration of Christmas-the setting up of the tree and the decorations, the wrapping of the presents, the purchase of the food, John the Baptist reminds us

that we are, more importantly, to **ask ourselves what preparations we have made in our hearts for the celebration of Christmas and throughout the year ahead.**

Will we be commemorating just this once a year fleeting moment of Santa Claus, Merry Christmas and presents? For in doing so we will be turning a blind eye to the consequences for humankind that John the Baptist warns us will ultimately flow from our self - centredness? Or will we be celebrating the ongoing love joy and peace and hope promised in the birth of the baby Jesus through this Advent, Christmas and into the future? **Will we, through hearing the words of John the Baptist today, allow Jesus to enter our lives anew in the special way at this time, a way which focuses not on ourselves but on others?**