Heroes of the Faith Series

John the Baptist
Herald and Prophet

Robert Weston

St Mary Bredin

Heroes of the Faith:
John the Baptist

It had been four hundred years since God had last spoken. Did God have nothing else to say to His people? Suddenly, (what a wonderful word that is!) God commissioned John to be a 'prophet of the Most High!'

"And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for Him,
to give His people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,
because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace."
And the child grew and became strong in spirit;
and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel.

(Luke 1:76-80)

Two questions to ponder

As we look at the ministry of John Baptist as a prophet, what is your understanding of the role of the prophet?

In the light of the long centuries of silence between God speaking to the nation of Israel, how do you cope when God does not appear to speak to you for a long time? Prolonged periods of waiting, with nothing to show for it, can test faith to the limit. Do you still believe what God has shown you when He seems exceedingly slow to resolve certain difficulties or to advance certain projects?

Given that there are are no job descriptions in either the career office or the church newspaper for a prophet of the Most High, what qualities do you, think are needed to depend exclusively on the Lord God of Hosts and to exercise such a ministry?

Knowing that God had called him to play a specific role, John devoted all his energies to the task. As Jesus would do for a much shorter period of time, he followed the Spirit's leading and went out to

live in the wilderness, to pray and wait for God's timing to appear in public. Apart from the dark side of the moon, it is hard to imagine anywhere more inhospitable. But this was the place where God would meet with him.

Knowing what the Lord is saying about a particular situation is a great asset; know what to do about it and when is often a separate art. We can get the first part right, but be too hasty with the second part, speaking out when God had shown us something primarily to pray about it until the right time comes to act on it. Occasionally, we go too far the other way, and sit on things we should be acting on.

Overview: The Prophet's Role

John was destined to be a voice in the wilderness, preparing the way for the Saviour, calling the people to turn from their sinfulness and to come home to their God. Do you know where the heart of your own calling lies?

Much of a prophet's best work is done in secret, praying for the Lord's ways to be enacted and for meetings to be turned into genuine encounters with Himself. In every generation, God has raised up watchmen and intercessors who understand what the Lord is saying to His people.

> *'When the church is rejoicing and celebrating the victory of our Lord, the prophet is already called to the next battle, the next pit of sorrow. The next work of the Lord is upon him. When the body of Christ is grovelling in pain and repentance, the prophet is rejoicing both that the body is repenting, and that the reward of the Lord's mercy's coming.'* *John and Paula Sandford*

The fact that someone is a prophet does not mean they always need to be prophesying. Often they are simply there as father and mother figures to encourage others to develop latent gifts in others. It is their hidden life with God that makes all this possible.

Questions to ponder

As a church, are we good, bad or indifferent at making a framework for budding prophets? Are we too rigid and stifling a set up to support them, or do we stand with them as they learn their difficult craft.

Remember, the Kingdom is about much more than just Church matters. God wants His people to be prophetic in their place of work, as well as in church meetings. Pray to grasp this concept – and for the power to move in the good of it.

Would you want to be a prophet?

John and Paula Sandford's excellent book *The Elijah Task* is an in-depth introduction to the role of the modern prophet, and provides invaluable insight into the stringent ways by which God trains His servants before they are safe to exercise this important ministry.

Sharp axe and winnowing fork: John preaches to the multitudes

> *'I baptise you with water, but He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.'* *Mark 1:8*

John exhorted people to flee from things that lead to judgment. Why do you think the people listend to such a stern uncompromising message? (John used language that was as strong as that of any Old Testament prophet)

We need people who are so steeped in the fear and the presence of the Lord that they can take us beyond people's desire to be entertained, and to show us how God really feels about situations. This is strong meat rather than easy desserts but how else will we know the mind of Christ?

Many are being led to go out on to the streets and practice prophetic evangelism: speaking the things God gives us to the people He brings across our paths. Mark Stibbe's book *Prophetic Evangelism* is helpful in this respect.

There were Pharisees and Sadducees present when John baptised, but we do not find them asking, "What shall we do?" They thought they knew what they had to do as well, so they weren't going to take

any notice of an odd bod like John. Pride, self-sufficiency and stubbornness are such enemies of God being able to move.

Echoing Isaiah's words, John tells us that *every valley will be filled in, and every mountain and hill low*. (Luke 3:5) How does this translate in our own experience?

One interpretation might be that the mountains are like our best and finest achievements. These are obtained by our mind sets, motivations, and dominant desires, and are the things we naturally gravitate towards. Even there, however, the Lord may have things to show us. Ponder the idea that our greatest strengths can also become our greatest weaknesses.

The valleys speak of our times of difficulty and depression. God is close to the brokenhearted and He goes to great lengths to raise us up from our times of fear and failure – provided that we continue to cry out to Him. It is the rich and self-reliant who go away empty handed. He receives the needy who seek Him with all their hearts.

Preaching that cuts to the quick

Most of the people John was addressing knew that they had done wrong – and were prepared to ask what they could do to put matters right. John told them that it was their duty to share what they had. His challenge was intended to goad them into doing what they could. Food and clothing are the two supports of life. It is so important to be aware of each other's needs and to watch out for each other. Ponder that thought now.

The soldiers' response, 'What about us: what shall we do?' (Luke 3:14) hints at how acutely they felt ostracized by the rest of society. What John does not do is to tell them to hand in their commission and to desert the army. Rather, he urges that there is to be no oppression, no violence to their fellow men, no launching of false accusations and no settling of old scores. God has a role and a place for them too – right where they were.

What do you feel the statements in Luke 3:7-18 have to say in a modern day context? How do you think our preaching ought to reflect these emphases?

The highest price possible

'He must increase but I must decrease.' (John 3:30)

John's words moved many to repentance – but they merely aroused resentment in others. Herod and his family, for example, hated being reproved by John, and had him imprisoned. Later, through the machinations of his wife and daughter, he was persuaded to have him beheaded. (Mark 6:20-29)

John was Christ's forerunner in suffering as well as in preaching. His death *felt* like a sad and premature end for a fine ministry, that had served to bring hope to many. Herod and his scheming family *appeared* to have won – but God was on the move. When the witch slays Aslan on the stone table, she congratulates herself that she has won the final victory. But death could not hold Aslan, any more than the beheading of John the Baptist spelt the end of God's cause on earth. In a sense it ushered in the fulness of Jesus' yet more glorious ministry.

Not everyone could recognise John the Baptist as a messenger sent from God, any more than they would accept Jesus Himself. It has been the same story with every subsequent revival sent by God. There have always been people who have missed what God is doing because the vessel by which He sends the revival doesn't fit in with their expectations. Can you think of any modern examples of this?

Jesus' assessment of John is that he was the greatest of all the prophets (John 5:35, cf Matt 11:9,11). The fact that John went through a period of perplexity in prison in no way decreases his spiritual standing.

Questions to ponder

Why did John feel as he did – and what did Jesus do to help him? Pray to be willing to honour the Lord, whatever He asks you to say or do.