



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

3rd Sunday of Advent-Year B-December 13th 2020

***Readings: Isaiah 61: 1-2. 10-11, Psalm Luke 1: 46-50. 53-54, 1
Thessalonians 5: 16-24***

The appearance and significance of John the Baptist looms large over the opening of the Gospel stories. Taken on their own, the accounts of John himself tell us little about his teaching and we might be forgiven, on the strength of these alone, for wondering why so many were drawn to him in the first place.

Unlike his great prophetic forebears John leaves no book or extensive account of a miraculous ministry – and yet he is, for Christians, the last and greatest of the Prophets. Why? What do we really know of him and his singular place in the scheme of our salvation history?

He emerges, in three of the canonical Gospel accounts as a fully fledged adult, eccentric desert dweller, ascetic, hermit, preacher and troubler of the illegitimate establishment. Luke alone gives us a clue as to his origin and importance. He gives us the birth narrative of John. He shows the critical link to Jesus and, with Matthew's help, explains why John emerges as he does.

A little background. We are all aware of the birth narratives surrounding Jesus. We know that the elderly relatives of Mary, Zechariah and Elizabeth, were the subject of angelic visitation and miraculous birth. We

know that the unborn child, who would come to be known as The Baptist, responded to the Presence of Christ while both were *in utero*, on the Visitation of Our Lady to Elizabeth. We know that a dumbstruck Zechariah will prophesy, on his son's birth, to a prophetic ministry – a hymn and salutation that is repeated at Morning Prayer daily. We know that the Christ child, Jesus, will be born in Judaea, courtesy of the Roman Census, a hundred miles from his northern town home, just a few miles from his cousin John in a neighbouring village. We can only speculate on how they appeared, as families, to lose touch and be reunited as adults on the banks of the Jordan River some thirty years later or why John was a desert dwelling ascetic.

What we do know, from Matthew's Gospel, is that the coming of the Magi sparked an event which, small as it was in the overall scheme of human wickedness, merits a prominent place in the annals of crime and echoes through history in the list of the actions of the damned and sent the Holy Family, angel warned, scurrying to exile in Egypt.

The Massacre of the Innocents was a political response to the dangerous information that a pretender to the throne had been born. Herod, the insecure and paranoid half-breed (as he was seen by his people) was, like many rulers, not averse to stopping the unwholesome prospect of insurrection and civil war with a preventative cull of the rivals. It was the politically astute thing to do and, in purely utilitarian terms (the greatest good of the greatest number) entirely justified.

Imagine, if you will, being presented with the opportunity to secure the throne by a little unfortunate bloodshed. Duped by the Magi, Herod knows where to look. Bethlehem. But we may be sure that the net would be spread wider according to his intelligence gatherers. Yes, there was a strange birth in Bethlehem – rumours of angels – witness of the shepherd bands. A child born in a shed or a cow byre to a northern wench, hastily married to an old man with little known dynastic provenance. But what of

Ein Karem, the little village suburb of Jerusalem, a few miles west of Bethlehem. There had been born a child to a priest of the Temple, a miracle child, attested by many witnesses, greeted by alarming prophecy, related to the once and future king of the sacred dynasty of David. Where would you put your money on?

We know that Jesus was rushed to Egypt until the death of Herod. We know nothing of the Baptist but..... his reappearance as a desert ascetic, we are told by early non-canonical tradition, was because he was rushed into the desert to save his life and, possibly, became a member of the Messianic Essene sect.

We know that there is a tradition that his father Zechariah, was grilled by the royal police as to the whereabouts of his 'miracle child' and refused to answer. For this, the tradition suggests, he was martyred in the Temple itself – an act Jesus later refers to later in Luke's Gospel and, in Matthew's parallels it with the murder of Zachariah's namesake centuries before, who called on a disobedient and paganising nation to repent.

These early second century witnesses can be found in the Protoevangelium of James, an apocryphal book but the source, inter alia, of much Marian doctrine in furnishing the backdrop to the Gospel story of the Holy Family.

This document also testifies to the replacement of the murdered Zachariah by another holy man, known to us from the Lucan account – none other than Simeon, the welcomer of the Holy Family to the Temple and the prophet of Mary's suffering.

Although these remarkable early sources are not contained in the Canon of Scripture, they do put flesh on the Gospel stories and context.

Thirty years later Jesus emerges from the unlikely Northern fastness of the Galilee town of Nazareth and John blows in from the desert to fulfil the prophecy of Isaiah and Prepare The Way Of The Lord.

The boys who last met in utero now meet in the flesh. The miracle child of angelic promise, the prophet to be, the son of the martyred priest, the one whom thousands follow and hang on his every word, the apparent hope of Israel, the man with everything in his hands, the last and greatest of the prophets, turns and points to the man on the riverbank, the unknown one, and hands it all over.

‘He is THE ONE. He is the Lamb of God. He is the new and eternal Passover. Follow Him.

It is not about me. It’s about Jesus.’

Amen and Amen.