

## Who is John the Baptist? – SJD – 11/12/16 – Matt 11: 2-11

Here's a question – what the following have in common? *Ola Jordan, Scarlett Moffatt, Sam Quek, Lisa Snowdon, Adam Thomas, Jordan Banjo, Carol Vorderman, Martin Roberts, Larry Lamb, Danny Baker and Wayne Bridge?* (Ans: They all appeared on recent series of 'I'm a Celebrity - Get me out of here'). Today we live in a celebrity culture – you have only to look at the number of quiz and chat programmes that are dedicated to celebrities.

But, of course, celebrities have always been around, though perhaps not in the same numbers. John the Baptist could be described as one of the great celebrities of his day. Any careful study of him highlights some of his obvious celebrity characteristics. He dressed in a way that drew attention to himself; he was known to do and say some outrageous things sometimes getting in trouble with the authorities as a result; and like many modern celebrities he was centre stage for a short while before disappearing off the scene. He even had an element of insecurity as he showed when sending his disciples to question Jesus. So what are we to make of John – was he just a mere celebrity – here today and gone tomorrow- or perhaps someone much more important. Let us explore our Gospel reading a little more deeply.

### **1. John had doubts and questions**

John, of course, was, as this time, sitting in the prison of Herod Antipas, in the fortress of Machaerus, east of the Dead Sea.<sup>1</sup> John had publicly rebuked Herod for his marital affairs. Herod had seduced his brother's wife and then lured her to leave her husband before marrying her. John denounced this behaviour and paid the penalty – prison. John's promising mission abruptly came to a halt. It is no surprise then that he had questions and doubts. These often appear, quite naturally, when things appear to go wrong. I remember hearing how Terry Wogan, the TV & radio personality, lost his Catholic faith following the death of a child in his family. For many the true test of faith comes not when all is well but when difficulties arrive. We even see this a little in the struggles of Jesus in Gethsemane before he finally prays to God the Father, '**not my will but yours be done**'.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps we should also remember that even Jesus had to confront the issues and pray the surrendering prayer three times before he was ready to move on.

It would be easy to see John's questions to Jesus as a sign of his lack of faith in Jesus but I believe it also shows his essential humanity. We need to remember that contrary to some popular teaching, being human means that we cannot be positive all the time. If we were then things like grief could never be processed resulting in deeper unresolved pain. This is one reason why God allows us all to go through the bad times as well as the good. That is not to say that our faith isn't challenged in the difficult times. As one writer has said, '**the secular world sees faith as a crutch, but Christians know that belief in an all-powerful and loving God can create more anguish when we are confronted with suffering**'<sup>3</sup> either personally or in others. At the heart of our Sunday celebrations lies the suffering of Christ on the Cross for our sins. We know from the Gethsemane story that Jesus understood his

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<sup>1</sup> According to Jos Ant 18.5.2 quoted in 'Matthew 1-13' D.A. Hagner (1993), Word Biblical Commentary p 300.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 26 v 39, 42, 44.

<sup>3</sup> Dr Csilla ('Chellah') Saysell 'Encounter with God' S.U. daily notes for 4/12/16.

sufferings as being a part of God's master plan and so steps forth into Good Friday and the Cross. John seems less sure if his own suffering has such a divine purpose or whether his work has been in vain. Hence his questions to Jesus.

## 2. John's honesty results in both reassurance and hope

John was the last of the OT prophets so it is pertinent that Jesus draws John's attention to OT prophecies of Isaiah<sup>4</sup> and how they are being fulfilled through Jesus. The miracles and mighty works that Jesus was performing, and which Matthew faithfully recorded in earlier chapters, indicate the breaking in of the Kingdom of God. These were evident to the crowds gathered to see Jesus and so also to John's disciples who came seeking a reply. They could return not just with an oral answer from Jesus but with evidence seen with their eyes.

But let us remember too that there were also present others with pre-conceived ideas and closed minds who interpreted the 'miracles' differently - as the work of the Devil<sup>5</sup>. If we are called to be open to our doubts and fears we are also called to be open to the evidence presented for the Christian Gospel. We have only to look at the disciples, including Paul, to see the transformation that such openness can bring when we discover the reality of the Gospel truths as God's message and means of salvation for us all.

But Jesus goes further and publicly recognises John for who he is – something the religious authorities were not willing to do.<sup>6</sup> Jesus declares that of those born of a woman '**there has not risen anyone greater than John**'.<sup>7</sup> John lies at the transition between the old and new orders. The old order were looking to the day in the future when the Messiah would come. The new order know personally that Messiah, Jesus who has come. John both looks forward for the coming Messiah and in a sense knows Jesus so sits at the pivot of history. Jesus, states that John is the climax of the old order – a prophet like those of the past but also the one through whom the OT expectation has finally seen reality with his arrival as the promised Messiah. John is the one at '**salvation-history's turning point**'.<sup>8</sup> Jesus's reassurance of John's greatness and faithfulness surely gave him great re-assurance of his own role and place in God's salvation story even as he awaited the end of his life.

**Conclusion** –We see how John's openness is rewarded as he receives back not only the reassurance that Jesus is the Messiah promised long but also the reassurance that his own life's work was not misguided but is part of God's vast salvation plan. By contrast we are reminded that a closed mind brings no new answers or comfort and may well condemn us to missing out on the greatest gift ever offered. We need this challenge to be open to any questions and doubts we have. As we contemplate the coming Messiah, this advent time, may we too be challenged to look again at areas of our lives and thinking that we have closed to scrutiny. I wonder what God really has planned for us as his body in Dormansland. May we all be open to all possibilities, whatever the cost may be. May John inspire us to seek answers from Jesus himself. Amen,

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<sup>4</sup> See Isaiah 35: 5,6 and 61:1

<sup>5</sup> See eg. Matthew 12:23 c.f. Matthew 12:24.

<sup>6</sup> See Matthew 21: 23-27

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 11:11

<sup>8</sup> Hagner D A op. cit. p 306