

## **The Birth of St John the Baptist**

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 24 June 2018

*Readings: Isaiah 40 vv 1-11 and Luke 1 vv 57-66 & 80*

One of the news stories that hit the headlines last week was the suggestion that some of our problems would be solved by the construction of a tunnel between Guernsey and Jersey. It's an interesting idea. I don't know enough about engineering or the geology of the bay of St Malo to know whether the idea is feasible. But I have a strong suspicion that it wouldn't be cheap. And given the old story, told, in Jersey about St Patrick removing all the undesirable animals and reptiles from Guernsey and sending them to Jersey, there might be some practical matters to consider.

But connecting places, whether a footpath or a road from A to B, has long been important for human society. And one of the most important developments has been our ability to build bridges to span rivers or, more recently, estuaries or even to make connections between the mainland and islands – think of the Skye bridge in Scotland or the bridge connecting Copenhagen in Denmark with Malmo in Sweden; though even these are dwarfed by some of the gigantic projects in China or the USA.

Today, we are invited to think of somebody who had the most tremendous significance in building a bridge between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

John the Baptist is one of only two people whose birth is remembered in the Church's Calendar. The other is Mary, the Mother of Jesus. John and Mary both have a hugely significant role in bringing in the new world of relationship between God and his people which finds its unique focus in Jesus. Mary plays her part in this by being the woman who allows the Son of God to be born of her. John the Baptist is the forerunner – the one who sets the scene into which Jesus enters at his baptism and the beginning of his public ministry.

John's birth is remembered as much as his life and his death, because his birth signals the end of the Old Testament era, and the beginning of the new relationship between God and humanity which we see in Jesus.

The story of John's birth has interesting similarities with the birth of some significant people in the Old Testament. In the gospel reading today, we have heard that John's parents were elderly – and did not expect even to be parents. In the culture of their day, when children were so important, John's parents were considered forgotten by God on account of their childlessness. But Zechariah and Elizabeth maintained lifelong trust in God. We see exactly the same experience in the birth of Isaac and Samuel. Abraham and Sarah are old, and Sarah definitely thinks herself beyond the years of bearing children. But they are told by God that Sarah will have a child. She laughs. 'Oh yes, you will have a child,' says God. And Isaac is born to them. Samuel's birth is equally remarkable. Hannah, distraught in her childlessness, prays for a son, whom she promises to give to the service of God – and in due time, Samuel is born and grows up to become a great prophet.

That John is a special gift to elderly parents is emphasized in the name given to the child. John means 'God is gracious' or 'God has shown favour'. But the name was not known or

passed down through the generations of Zechariah's family. Even as a baby, John starts as he means to go on; he challenges social conventions.

Eventually, John goes to live in the desert in order to devote himself more fully to God and to prepare himself for the role of calling the people of Israel to repentance and heralding the arrival of Jesus. As we heard in the reading from the prophecy of Isaiah, 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.' That is John's task and calling: to challenge injustice and hypocrisy, whilst offering God's loving forgiveness, and a second chance, to all those who step into the Jordan to be baptised.

But when Jesus comes on to the scene, John gracefully steps into the background, his work done.

St John the Baptist is rightly honoured in the church; he is acknowledged as the last of the prophets – standing on the cusp of God's most dramatic intervention, at the watershed between the Old and the New Testaments. John is the one who went ahead to prepare the way for Jesus and his Kingdom. In the prologue to St John's gospel, we read that John is a 'man sent by God... who came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him'. John is the bridge between the Old and the New; indispensable, but with a clearly defined function – encouraging and enabling us to cross into the new covenant relationship between God and his people.

Is John irrelevant today? By no means. He challenges us to stand up against the injustice of our own times and to point people to Jesus, the source of life and hope. And above all, just as he is the bridge between the Old Testament and the New, John invites us to build bridges, whether between faith and unbelief or between those who are separated by disagreement – whatever its cause – in the name of Jesus, the prince of peace.