



Sunday, 9 December 2018 – Advent 2
Sermon for 10.00am Eucharist at St Andrew's Parish Church Guernsey
Readings: Philippians 1:3-11, Gospel St Luke 3:1-6
The witness of John the Baptist
Given by Rev Juliette E C Robilliard

When receiving directions, it's helpful to be able to visualise the information by associating it with familiar names and places. Let me take you on a trip down memory lane to the late 1960s, to find a specific house near the shops in St Peter's. If you were not born and bred in Guernsey these directions may totally mystify you unless, over time, you've gone native!

Drive passed Sion Chapel, Le Riches Stores, Midland Bank and the house you want is just next to the entrance to the Sylvans. In other words, opposite St Peter's School. Now, what could be clearer than that? Someone new to the island would be none the wiser.

We may know the four Gospels well but three of them were written from a Jewish viewpoint which, for gentiles at that time, would have needed interpretation. Hence, in his Gospel, Luke demystifies contextual detail for his reader. Just like us, Luke is a gentile and he's writing to a gentile named Theophilus, who's a Roman Governor. Luke signposts his writing by giving the names of people Theophilus could identify. Also, just like us, Luke believes that Jesus is God incarnate and he wants to share that with Theophilus, so that he too may come to believe in the living God.

Luke quotes a notable list of leaders: there's Emperor Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, the Tetrarchs Herod, Philip and Lysanius then Annas and Caiaphas the high priests. From these names Theophilus would be able to pinpoint Gospel events with historical moments in time and so, make connections. Now we've got that sorted, let's consider those leaders whose names are well known to us but unlike Theophilus, we lack his native knowledge.

Tiberius was one of the greatest Roman generals. He expanded the Roman empire further east into territories such as present-day Iran. Then further west by crossing the Alps and conquering the countries we know, as The Netherlands and Germany. Tiberius was ruthlessly, single-minded in attaining his goals.

It was Tiberius who appointed Pontius Pilate to enforce civil obedience in the region of Judea. We know only too well that Pilate was more than satisfied to keep the peace by agreeing to crucify innocent Jesus, thereby appeasing the senior Jewish religious leaders. Now, let's consider the Tetrarchs. Herod and Philip were brothers and had each been given a share of their father Herod the Great's land to rule. Herod knew how to curry favour with the Romans: he built a new capital on the shore of Galilee with the diplomatic name of 'Tiberius'! Philip used his diplomacy skills dextrously so that the Romans permitted him to rule a Greek enclave without

interference, thereby Philip benefitted from the Greeks wealth. Then there was Lysanias who fell out with the Egyptians. Whether the reason for the disagreement was purely political or, that Cleopatra wanted to get her mitts on his territory is unclear: either way they killed him.

Finally, we have the two high priests Annas and Caiaphas: father-in-law and son-in-law. Annas was retired but just like a Bishop retains his title in retirement, so did Annas. They ensured that the Jewish faith was practiced with rigid adherence to interpretation of the law and, also, kept the religious hierarchy in the family.

By now you may be wondering, why I have given this history lesson. Well, today, we remember John the Baptist. To understand his life and times we will fail to grasp the courage of this man and his ministry if we can't picture the power of the political and religious regime that he was preaching against. John was fearless in his criticism of religiosity that had warped peoples' perspective of God. Ordinary people flocked to him because he preached about a loving God of equality, such a different message to the Jewish leaders. John also criticised the immoral behaviour of the Tetrarchs, their adultery and multiple marriages, which set an appalling example to their people. As a consequence, he made enemies at Court and ultimately, with Herod's consent, John was beheaded.

In his life and witness John successfully gave people a refreshed perspective on faith. By urging repentance and forgiveness, he gave them new faith signposts laying the highway for their salvation, so that they would be able to identify Jesus, as God incarnate, when he came to live among them. In accepting John's message, these people became foundational followers, who in turn would become Jesus' disciples. Subsequently, by their witness they would encourage others to be disciples, similar to Paul lovingly encouraging the Philippians in his Epistle.

John and Paul's engagement with people came from a living relationship with God; they talked to God and talked about God. That was their mission action plan, which was both simple and effective. To conclude, may we pray that we too can say: "That's just like us"?

Amen.