

ST JOHN THE BAPTIST DAY UNIVERSITY SERMON

Magdalen College, Oxford, 17th June, 2018

“HE MUST INCREASE BUT I MUST DECREASE”

Next Thursday is the longest day of the year, the summer solstice. I, for one, will not be at Stonehenge to witness the sunrise between the principal stones but, doubtless, many people will gather there as neo-paganism continues to make its doubtful impression on the minds of the more naive among the eco-friendly. Some say it is the middle of summer - Midsummer's Day - but I hazard that this perception dates from before the seasons began noticeably to slip - May is often now far more summery than not-always-flaming June and there can be wonderful weather in early September.

There is a certain amount of confusion around this date because originally both Midsummer's Day and the Summer Solstice or longest day fell on the 24th of June. However, as the centuries have passed, the longest day has crept backward and is now either the 20th or 21st of June. This discrepancy is caused by the variants required to calculate the Julian Calendar and the Tropical Year and this is further confused by the Gregorian Calendar. This means

that although we still celebrate Midsummer's Day on the 24th of June the actual Summer Solstice takes place on the 20th or 21st of June. This year it will fall on the 21st – this coming Thursday. It is sobering to think that the nights will then begin their slowly accelerating process of drawing in. There ought to be plenty of balmy evenings ahead but very soon the daylight will slowly but surely diminish.

This diminishing is the reason why Midsummer's Day was chosen, millennia ago when liturgical calendars began to be compiled, to be the principal feast day of St John the Baptist.

*Of woman born shall never be
A greater prophet than was he
Whose mighty deeds exalt his fame
To greater than a prophet's name.*

Why? I hear you ask. Well, somewhat paradoxically to my mind, given the stridency of his language and the forcefulness of his personality, an important part of John the Baptist's rugged greatness as he is depicted in the Gospels, consists in his humility and self-forgetfulness. He is committed to bearing witness to the radiant light of the Messiah, whom he is anxious not to hide from others. He speaks of one whose sandal he is not worthy to undo and says of him "He must

increase but I must decrease.” So, John is born - conveniently - on Midsummers Day and as the light decreases so his role decreases in relation to Jesus who is born, as near as makes little difference, at the Winter Solstice when the light begins to increase. Augustine saw this diminishing and increasing in this way when he wrote in a sermon: *“John is the voice, but the Lord in the beginning was the Word. John is a voice for a time, but Christ is the eternal Word from the beginning.”* The eternal must increase but the temporal must decrease.

Augustine further explained to his congregation the significance of John: *“He, it seems,”* he wrote, *“has been inserted as a kind of boundary between the two Testaments, the Old and the New. That he is somehow or other a boundary is something that the Lord himself indicates when he says, ‘The Law and the prophets were until John’. So, he represents the old and heralds the new. Because he represents the old, he is born of an elderly couple; because he represents the new, he is revealed as a prophet in his mother’s womb. You will remember that, before he was born, at Mary’s arrival he leapt in his mother’s womb. Already he had been marked out there, designated before he was born; it was already shown whose forerunner he would be, even before he saw him.”*

Jesus thought John the Baptist was important. The

words of the hymn I quoted earlier echo words used by Jesus in Matthew's gospel when describing his kinsman, the son of Zachariah and Elizabeth: "Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist." But for his contemporaries, especially in the clerical establishment of the day, he was a puzzle, a mystery man and a problem. Early in John's gospel we hear how the establishment sent messengers to him at his headquarters by the river Jordan and enquired of him exactly who he thought he was and what, indeed, he thought he was doing! John's answer leaves us in no doubt. "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord." He is a figure in the great prophetic tradition of Israel. His words have the authentic ring of an Isaiah or an Elijah, yet in one important respect he is greater than these prophets for his ministry is one of immediate preparation for the coming of the Messiah. Like the prophets he had a strong sense of vocation, of calling, of his part in God's plan as revealed in the prophetic utterance of his father, Zechariah, when his birth was foretold.

John's message as we hear it in the Gospels was an urgent one, a call to repentance, a call to a new turning to God, in the full expectation of the coming of the chosen One. "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is *at hand*." Here is both

urgency and hope. Expectation like this can be seen as a powerful form of prayer. Expectation is prayer because it is desire rooted in faith. John looked for the salvation which Jesus was to bring from the moment he hailed him as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” - he longed for it, desired it with his whole being and to desire it in this way is surely to pray powerfully for it. St Paul tells *us* to “pray without ceasing” and John Baptist’s ministry teaches us about this sort of prayer. His expectation, his hope exemplifies in every way what St Augustine tells us about unceasing prayer - *“There is a form of prayer that is really ceaseless: it is interior and consists in desire . . . if you do not wish to leave off praying, then do not leave off desiring.”*

Because of the many incidents in John’s life reported in the gospels, we know a good deal about him. Luke’s gospel reports in detail the announcement of his birth. His miraculous entry onto the scene as one who represents a vital milestone in the execution of the divine plan, is highlighted by Luke with narrative signals drawn from the Scriptures which would have been readily recognized by his first readers. These signs are in full accord with Old Testament tradition. For example, John was conceived in his parents’ old age in the way that Isaac was born of Sarah when she was past child-bearing. The Old Testament is full of such unusual

occurrences in which God makes it clear that he is taking the initiative in the salvation of his people and choosing for himself the instruments with which to bring it about. All the incidents in Luke's story of John the Baptist's birth point this way.

The angelic annunciation to Zechariah in the context of the Temple liturgy is likewise full of meaning and the story has many parallels in the Old Testament. Then there is the lovely story of the Visitation when we hear of the wonderful way in which the child John leapt in Elizabeth's womb at the proximity of the as yet unborn Saviour in the womb of Mary. This recalls with striking and deliberate parallelism the way in which King David leapt and danced before the Ark of the Covenant as it was brought, for the first time, into Jerusalem.

The birth of John the Baptist is also the occasion for a splendid poem which is both a song of thanksgiving and a description of the child's future role. This canticle, the Benedictus, is recited by the Church every day as part of Morning Prayer because it tells us so much of what God wants us to understand about the salvation John heralded and Jesus brings. "And you child shall be called the prophet of the Most High for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way." This salvation consists in the forgiveness of sins and is

the work of God's tender mercy and, as we know, John used the powerful symbol of baptism to illustrate the dramatic way in which God forgives sins and inaugurates his new kingdom of mercy.

But John is also a herald - *Hark a herald voice is calling, Christ is nigh it seems to say*" His mission is to go before the Lord and to prepare his way. John is aware of this as he speaks of himself in Isaiah's words: *"I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord."* But even more positively, he acts to make known the one who is already there but unrecognized and points him out when he comes: *"Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."* Steeped in the teaching and language of Isaiah and the Torah, John has a vision of Christ as the true Passover lamb whose death will be far more effective than that of the original Passover Lamb in Exodus in that it brings salvation to the whole world.

John the Baptizer teaches us much of we need to know about the coming of the Messiah. His loud voice and striking example still ring out across the centuries to show us what our Christian task is. We are to pray unceasingly the prayer of desire, the prayer of earnest expectation, and we are to regard as of total obligation the task to make known to the

world the one who still stands unrecognized by so many - the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. This is “our vocation and ministry.” This is how we serve God “in holiness and truth to the glory of his name.”

The solstice will soon be upon us - Midsummer’s Day - St John Baptist’s Day - is still to come. When it does come next Sunday, follow John Baptist’s pointing finger, “behold the Lamb of God”, hear what he has to say and with him make known to the needy, waiting world the One who, as he promised, is in our midst. Jesus, “with us until the end of time,” is still unrecognized by so many. As John diminishes so let him increase - to whom be ascribed as is most justly due all might, majesty, dominion and power, now and for evermore. Amen.

Jeremy Haselock