

Mark 1: 1-8

Today's gospel reading is about John the Baptist. Although we don't tend to think of him as one of the prophets, John the Baptist comes in a long line of people who predict the arrival of a future Messiah. Our Gospel passage gives us many signs to help us understand John's role. John is the herald of Exodus 23: 20 and the 'messenger of the covenant' in Malachi 3:1; he is the voice of the prophet in Second Isaiah, who cries out in the wilderness, 'prepare a way for the Lord' (Isa 40:3).

Wilderness, *erēmos* in Greek, means the same as 'desert'. Wilderness imagery deliberately reminds us of the Exodus and the desert God's people wandered through, seeking the Promised Land.

To signify his role as a biblical prophet, John wears camel hair and a leather belt (Zech 13:4) like the prophet Elijah (2 Kings 1:8) and similar to any prophet, John demands a response from his audience. He invites people to receive a baptism of repentance, for the forgiveness of sins.

You may be surprised to hear that we don't know quite *how* John baptises people. After being exposed to so many centuries of images that show Jesus ankle deep in the Jordan, with John pouring water over his head from a shell, we tend to assume we know exactly how this happens, but in fact the evidence is very sketchy. In first century Palestine, there are Jewish washing rituals and some sects do have a type of baptism ritual for new converts, but John's baptism seems to be new and unique to his ministry. We have to leave the details to our imaginations.

John's baptism is for the remission of sins. Remission has the sense of a debt being cancelled, which is a very Jewish concept. In the biblical Year of Jubilee, debts are cancelled every fifty years, on the Day of Atonement. And during Yom Kippur, the annual Jewish Festival of Atonement, atonement for sins is a central concept. In biblical times, the sins of the people are symbolically carried away by a scapegoat, sent into the wilderness from Jerusalem. Much of our Christian imagery for salvation and forgiveness derives from these Jewish roots.

For those who respond to John's call, he baptises them in the river Jordan. In the bible the Jordan symbolises a watery barrier between exile and exodus on one side and salvation in the Promised Land on the other. Going into the Jordan represents traversing a path by which God's people return from exile (Isa 49:11; 51:10). A path created by God, for God's people to return to God.

John symbolically enacts this salvation, by dipping people in the water that runs between a place of alienation from God, and the place of God's kingdom. But John makes it clear that his baptism prefigures a much greater one which is yet to come.

'Someone is coming whose sandals I am unworthy to untie. I baptise with water, but he will baptise with the Holy Spirit.'

And with masterful dramatic irony, the Gospel writers let us know that this person is already here. This entire scene starts with the words:

'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God' (Mark 1:1).

The Gospel writers want us to know that Jesus is our path back to God, our route through the river Jordan, by whom we too, enter the Promised Land of God's Kingdom. And, just as we see Jesus receive baptism from John, so too, by faith, we identify with that same baptism and so symbolically identify with Jesus' death and resurrection, by which we receive the forgiveness of sins, the cancellation of our debt. And, as newly adopted members of God's family, God says to us, the same as to his own Son, 'You are my child, in you, I am well pleased.'

So John's baptism still challenges us today, to prepare to receive our faith afresh, by a baptism no longer limited by a specific time and place, but available to all people everywhere, through the Holy Spirit.

Advent is a time of preparation, a time for renewal, and a time of hope for what is to come. So, as we prepare this advent tide, may God's Spirit renew us in our journey of faith, as we pray 'maranatha, come Lord Jesus'.

Amen.