

## **Listening to John the Baptist**

### **Management Training**

Several years ago when working in business, after recently taking up the role of a Depot Manager, I was sent on a management training course along with others from the company in a similar position. Most of it was focussed on the three p's: process, procedure and, rather predictably, profit.

But the sort of initial ice-breaker session concentrated on a fourth P - personality. And the one question I remember being asked was a common one for these sorts of personality tests: It asked us:

*'if you could travel back in time and give your younger self one piece of advice, what would it be?'*

I wonder how you would answer that. Now I can't remember how I answered that at the time but the question has stayed with me and the more of life I have seen, and with the benefit of a lot of hindsight, the advice that I would give to my younger self would be this:

*'be more choosy about whose voices you listen to'.*

Because with hindsight many voices that I have listened to – frankly I wish I had ignored: the voices that espoused negative and destructive messages that discouraged me and held me back. And there are others I wished I had listened to more: the voices of life: those of encouragement, wisdom and rebuke, aiming to help me and build me up and give me life.

Now none of us can go back in time, so I wonder whose voices we do listen to mostly *today*?

### **A voice in the wilderness**

The world is so full of different voices that it is hard to discern the best ones for us to listen to. There is a clamour of seemingly convincing

voices all demanding our attention and allegiance which makes it difficult to sift between the helpful and the unhelpful messages.

As Christians of course our aim is to discern what God is saying to us in whichever way God chooses to communicate with us. Rarely do we hear the audible voice of God but God speaks in and through many other ways to us. So finding space in our lives – time and place to work that out and then listen – is important.

This is where the story of John the Baptist is so important in our faith. He was not a prophet whose voice was heard competing with the cacophony of others in Jerusalem, in the Temple or the Courts; his voice cried out in the wilderness, a place and space of silence and no distraction. You had to physically come away from all other noise and distractions to specifically listen to him. You had to want to go there; you had to make the effort.

But finding a physical space and time to listen for God is only half the task. Because often the busiest most frantic places are not what is happening around us but what is going on inside us; our minds can be full of distractions and diversions preventing us from concentrating on listening out for the still, small voice within.

We need find our inner wilderness and stillness – a place of no distraction - in order to listen to our own deep feelings which are often the starting place for hearing that still, small voice of God.

### **Listening to the times**

John the Baptist's message was one of repentance and preparation. He took Israel back to its younger self with his Elijah-like appearance and a reminder of the message of prophets from those earlier days, messages which went unheeded by many of those with power bringing disastrous results. He was calling for people to repent which means to 'go beyond their current mindset' and take a long, hard look,

deep within and around themselves - and to be open to the new thing that God was going to ask of them.

The coming of Jesus and with him the kingdom of God would require a fresh way of looking at life and would involve admitting their past mistakes which would prove to be the gateway and opening to a new future. It was a no-nonsense message from a no-nonsense prophet.

John's message is relevant today. Listening to the reflective voice of experiences, good and bad, helps prepare us for our future. Admitting where we've got things wrong before is a good way to prepare for making future decisions.

### **Good and bad messages**

There are voices today espousing hate and destruction; and sadly they are usually the loudest voices in the debate but that doesn't mean they are in the majority.

Although harsh and challenging, John's message is not one of hate but of love.

"Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent." said Jesus in the book of Revelation.

God's voice comes through life-giving messages, whether as an honest complement or in a helpful but challenging rebuke; these are wise voices to listen to. Voices that bring messages of hate and destruction, just for the sake of it, are to be ignored.

This week Birmingham has mourned the death of Benjiman Zephaniah. As a child he found himself forced into listening to the voices which told him to commit crime and to the local culture of racism and homophobia. He heard from some of his teachers that he could not be educated and that his life would be spent in crime and a

prison cell. But listening to the voices of nature, to preachers at his mother's church, and to one teacher who diagnosed him with dyslexia, changed his mindset and wow, did he not go way beyond himself and all that negativity, to become the brilliant poet and social activist he was.

Voices can be used for the building of the Kingdom of God with all its life-enhancing qualities; or for the rejection the idea of any part of it. We can never underestimate the importance of to whom we choose to listen - and who listens to *our* voices.

### **Past, Advent and future**

John's voice is consistent in doing one thing: pointing us towards Jesus, the Kingdom of God and therein life. Whether his first audience went all the way from his baptism of water to be baptised by Jesus with the Spirit, was up to them; some presumably did and some didn't. God created us all with free will to decide to listen to whom we choose to; it is ultimately up to us; it is our choice.

But to whom we choose to listen will influence how we go about our lives. In the future it's no use wishing we could return to the past; Advent is a time to wake up to that.

So this Advent can we, like the people of Jerusalem and all Judea , go and meet John the Baptist in the wilderness - a place free from distraction both in our surroundings and within ourselves, to listen for the voice that really does want to help us, build us up and bring us life?

Can we reject the voices of negativity and destruction that hold us back; can we reject those voices – perhaps some from way back or some from right now that tell us we can't achieve anything; can we tune-out of the voices that keep us down and tune-in to the voices of love and encouragement that build us up in life.

Let us then, this Advent, listen to the voice of John the Baptist, and those who we trust, in helping us to *go beyond* by pointing us towards abundant life in the kingdom of God and therein presence of Jesus.  
Amen