

26th June Patronal Festival - Feckenham

Birth of St John the Baptist Year C

Isaiah 40:1-11

Luke 1:57-66;80

Today, we commemorate in our patronal festival service, a character of incredible importance.

For he was not just seen by some as a 'weirdo' living an extreme lifestyle but he was actually a social reformer, far ahead of his time. He warned people of the consequences of their extravagant lifestyles. We lived in the wilderness, ate wild honey and had a great taste for camel skin clothing.....are we talking about me living my week in Yorkshire again? No - off course not!

The story of the birth of John the Baptist is full of warnings. Some of which we will explore this morning.

Who was this man, John the Baptist? Luke's Gospel carries the only reference to John's birth in the New Testament. There's plenty about his other appearances but Luke alone tells his birth story. There are 61 references to John the Baptist in the New Testament, so he was clearly a very unique man and his whole calling is centred on the wilderness and a solitary beginning.

He is really important for Christians as he is what is called an intertestamental figure in other words he bridges the gap between the Old and New Testament.

John the Baptist role was to foretell and warn. His life was set apart with that sole aim.

But how are we with warnings?

We all appreciate a bit of warning don't we, if something out of the ordinary is going to happen?

Well, I supposed we were all warned about the potential for Brexit - but could we hardly believe the outcome - and the potential upset and difficulties we might find ourselves in? Or the opportunities that might, in time to come. Now we are all going to have to live with the consequences, regardless if we liked the result or not.

At a more mundane level - perhaps -

We like to be told if there is something specific happening in church next week, if our electricity is going to be off for a few hours, if

the school bus is delayed, if we are to receive an unexpected visitor? We like to be forewarned.

Some sorts of warnings seem to go in one ear and out the other. How familiar is the refrain “you need to work hard at school” or “you’ve got to revise well for exams” or “practice makes perfect”.

.....That last warning usually comes long after the time when practice would have helped. And for those just finishing their GCSEs, we will have to wait and see if that warning was heeded.

Other warnings are a normal part of life. A red traffic light is not dangerous itself, but if we do not obey its warning, the consequences may be fatal.

A warning bell may tell us that a play is about to start – or that a church service will begin shortly.

Lighthouses shine their lights and sound their fog horns so that ships can locate themselves when visibility is poor. An alarm clock wakes us ready for the day.

Signs in the High Street in early August might warn us of impending road resurfacing - and access to frontages only.

But we don't really like warnings.

Four-way red traffic lights are a nuisance, especially up at Astwood Bank! Those Highway signs for resurfacing in August - Who will drive on - in the hope of getting to the Village Shop - only to be turned back by the Hi Viz jacket brigade.....

Alarm clocks are horrible - mobile phone ones worse (if you're not a morning person). People reminding us of things we have forgotten are just nagging. I know it's my wedding anniversary coming up tomorrow! But did I order the flowers.....?

We don't much like warnings. They are ominous things.

So back to our Patronal figure - John The Baptist – Let's look at some of the warnings we hear about in the Gospel and reflect on these warnings for our life today-.

Firstly, Zechariah, John's father, had made the mistake of doubting the message the angel brought to him but the unexpected child he and Elizabeth were to have, and had been struck dumb as a result.

Warning one – believe what God tells you.

Now of course, that leaves a different issue of working out whether the message you are hearing is from God or not, an issue of discernment, of sorting wheat from chaff.

We do it all the time – sifting the information we receive sorting it into the important and the trivial, the useful and the useless, the urgent and the long term, the fact and the fiction.

It's not an easy process, and if we get it wrong, the consequences can be disproportionately punishing.

You might think Zechariah had it easy, being faced with an angel (a bit of a give away perhaps!), that he should have had no difficulty discerning that this was of God.

But what if you suddenly met an angel? Or what if you heard a voice from heaven? What if you dreamed a dream that foretold the future, good or bad?

Would you believe it? Would you tell anyone? What would you do? Would you think of it as a prophetic gift, or a Godly message? Or the first stage of a mental illness?

Discernment can be difficult.

So - Warning 2 – is this a message from God or not?

And so, that unexpected child arrived safely. The friends and neighbours are excited, rejoicing and proclaim he is to be named after his father, the custom of that time – but Zechariah frantically disagrees.

But as he couldn't speak, he had to somehow communicate without a voice.

Warning 3: if you have discerned the will of God, you may have to work quite hard to obey it.

Zechariah was faced with a crowd of people, all of whom knew exactly what the custom was, and what needed to be done – with just the minor problem that all of them were wrong.

They had been involved in these rituals all their lives, they were aware of the rules, the significance, the what to do and when to do it.

They could do this without needing Zechariah to say a single word. This community knew exactly what it was all about.

Warning 4 – just because everyone says so, doesn't mean it's right.

Elizabeth spoke out, she already understood from her husband what their child must be called. She was right, she had understood and discerned God's will for their child, either directly or through Zechariah. She used her voice, she got the attention of all the people, and explained what must be done. Of course, they didn't believe her

Warning 5 – just because what you say is right, you won't necessarily be believed.

At last it all comes right, Zechariah names John correctly, and his voice returns.

When Zechariah doubts God and questions what is going on, a measure of his freedom is curtailed. He becomes dumb/loses his voice.

He is, then, less than the person he could be.

When he acts with God, serves God, his freedom to speak returns. And he uses his freedom to praise God.

When we turn from God, we are diminished.

We are not the people we could be.

As we turn to God, and draw closer, we grow, and become more and more the people God has made us to be.

But even in this joy, this realization of a person walking with God, the people watching are fearful . Zechariah reacts with praise and thanksgiving, and prophecies about the life of

his son John. But the friends and neighbours are afraid

Warning 6 – even when you are confident in God, others will be afraid.

We have seen how the story of the birth of John The Baptist, the one who went ahead and warned people that the Messiah was coming, was itself full of warnings. It's a story that tells us that people are people, that 2000 years ago, humans were much the same.

We still try to discern – is that God speaking?

DO we understand the message?

Are we prepared to obey? Or do we turn away?

What will other people think?

Will we act? I think we all should-----Amen