


Forerunner, Prophet, Witness



An Advent journey with John the Baptist

 Anglican
Diocese
of Waiapu

Advent 2025

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You may like to begin each study with this:

A Song of Praise for Advent: The Desert shall Blossom

1 The desert shall rejoice and blossom;
it shall rejoice with gladness and singing.

2 The glory of the Lord shall be revealed:
and the majesty of our God.

3 Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened:
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

4 then shall the lame leap like the hart:
and the tongue of the dumb shall sing for joy.

5† For waters shall break forth in the wilderness:
and streams in the desert.

6 The ransomed of the Lord shall return:
and come with singing, with everlasting joy upon their heads.

7 They shall obtain joy and gladness:
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. Isaiah 35:1, 2, 5, 6,10

Glory to the Father and to the Son: and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now: and shall be for ever. Amen.

**My hope is that through these reflections you may greet Christmas Day
with a new sense of the love God has for you and for all the world.**

**Rev'd Dr Deborah Broome,
Ministry Educator, Anglican Diocese of Waiapu**

Welcome

Welcome to this study

This study's designed for two different contexts: groups meeting in parishes or other ministry units (for example, schools or workplaces), or people on their own to do at home. You might want to do it as a family. It's a way of helping us reflect on this season and what it means to prepare for the coming of Christ.



Welcome to Advent



The word Advent means “coming” or “arrival.” In this season we get ready to celebrate the birth of Jesus the Christ in his First Coming, and we anticipate the return of Christ the King in his Second Coming. So we’re looking forward as well as looking back. We live “between the times” – between the first coming of Christ and his second, and as we do we’re called to be faithful stewards of what’s been entrusted to us as God’s people.

Advent runs from the 4th Sunday before Christmas (Advent 1) to the Sunday immediately prior to Christmas (Advent 4) and on to Christmas Day. It’s about 4 weeks long (shorter than Lent, that other season of preparation), depending on which day of the week Christmas Day falls. This study, though, is only 3 sessions, not 4 – because things get busy at this time of year.

This year Advent Sunday (Advent 1) is 30 November, with Advent 2 on 7 December, Advent 3 on 15 December, and Advent 4 on 21 December. Advent Sunday is the Church’s New Year’s Day, and we switch to a different set of readings. In this coming year our Gospel readings for Sunday Eucharist mostly come from Matthew.

1 Forerunner



John the Baptist is the focus of the Gospel readings on two out of four Sundays in Advent. Only two Gospels begin with Jesus' birth, but all four preface Jesus' ministry with John the Baptist. So he's in all the Gospels – and it's largely about John in relation to Jesus, rather than John for his own sake. He's referred to about 90 times in the New Testament; only Peter and Paul amongst the key disciples

appear in more passages.

- ❖ ***What do we already know about John the Baptist (John the baptiser)?***

Who was John?

Some of what we know (or think we know) about him is tradition, rather than anything historical – and in some places the Gospel passages are inconclusive or mutually incompatible. One example is the relationship – if any – between Jesus and John. Mark and Matthew don't raise the question at all, neither does Luke in the main part of the Gospel (eg chapter 3), but in Luke's Infancy Narrative (chapters 1-2) there are parallel annunciation and birth stories for John and Jesus, in which Mary and John's mother Elizabeth are described as relatives (not necessarily cousins). In the Fourth Gospel, John states clearly on two occasions that he did not know Jesus prior to meeting him.

But we're about to go into the year of Matthew, so let's look at how Matthew portrays John.

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord;
make his paths straight.’ ”



Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region around the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins. (Matthew 3:1-6)

In Matthew, John is very much the forerunner, the one who’s sent as the messenger, preparing the way for the important one who is to come. Matthew’s not that interested in John as a person, outside of his role in preparing for Jesus.

I know what that feels like. When I was posted overseas for Foreign Affairs I was once the “advance party” for a ministerial visit to Copenhagen. I had to get there early, meet with the people at the Danish Foreign and Agriculture ministries (always remembering to check out where the toilets were in the building, in case the minister needed to use them), get out to the airport ahead of time, and be there at the gate ready for the moment when the Minister and her party came off the plane. Most of the people I dealt with weren’t interested in me at all – just in what I could tell them about the Minister and what she wanted to know.

❖ ***Have any of you had a similar experience, of being the one who went ahead to get things ready? How did it feel?***

We get a bit of John's message in Matthew – and a lot of what's there is looking ahead, to who Jesus is and what he will do.

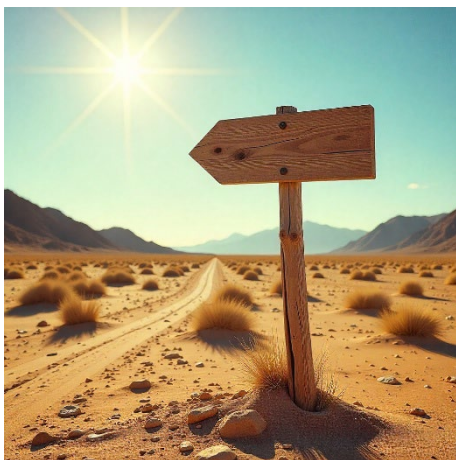
“I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I, and I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” (Matthew 3:11-12)

John's task here is to point people to the future, to look ahead, to the one who is coming.

❖ ***Step into John's sandals, try on his camel's hair clothes; imagine his life. What might it have been like to be John?***

The one who is to come

Who is the one who was coming? The people were looking for someone, waiting for someone. Sometimes they were waiting for God to come: the Lord of the covenant, who will come to be with his people. Sometimes they were waiting for the arrival of a messiah promised by Jewish tradition. The quotation that Matthew includes here comes from the prophet Isaiah:



A voice cries out: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’ (Isaiah 40:3)

This is 2nd Isaiah, the prophet of the Exile. He proclaims a message of hope and comfort in one of the darkest hours in Israel's history. God is going to restore the people, and those who are waiting are to prepare a way for God to come to them through the wilderness. There's a sense of expectancy

in all this. God is going to come, and the forerunner's task is to get the people ready to receive God. That's the reason John is such a part of our Advent readings.

Being the forerunner

John is the messenger spoken of in Malachi, the prophet of the end-times. He's dressed like Elijah: "A hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist ... It is Elijah the Tishbite." (2 Kings 1:8) The allusions to Elijah in the Gospels are part of their picture of John. The Jews remembered that Elijah was taken up into heaven by God, and might therefore come again. Moreover, John's diet is like that of the strict Nazarites. A Nazarite was an individual dedicated to special service to God (either for a limited period or for a lifetime), through a vow made by that individual or by a parent. The person had to abstain from the fruit of the vine (including grape skins) and other intoxicants, avoid contact with dead bodies, and not cut their hair or beards (Num 6:1-7).

This idea of being set apart for particular service to God is what comes out of the portrayal of John in Luke's Infancy Narrative (Luke 1-2). There we have John's birth announced (including references to Elijah and to a Nazarite life, Luke 1:5-9), and the dedication of the child for his key task, spoken by his father Zechariah after his birth:



And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.
By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace. (Luke 1:76-79)

Throughout Matthew, and in the other Synoptic Gospels (Mark and Luke), John is the forerunner, the one to “go before the Lord to prepare his ways.” Even with his death at the hands of Herod (see, for example, Matthew 14:1-12) John is a forerunner of Jesus’ death at the hands of those in power. Just as John suffered and died, Jesus too must suffer and die. John’s task – the purpose for which he came – was to get the people ready to receive God when God comes. And because the Gospels are focused on Jesus, John is portrayed as the herald, the advance party for Jesus. Right the way through, John is subordinated to Jesus: Jesus is the main act, John is only the warm-up.



We see this especially in Luke’s Infancy Narrative, where everything we’re told about John is then echoed by what we’re told about Jesus – except that Jesus is greater. Both John’s and Jesus’ births were foretold by the angel Gabriel. John was filled with the Holy Spirit even in his mother’s womb, but the very conception of Jesus as Son of God involves the Spirit’s creative act. John’s mother Elizabeth admits that Mary’s son will be greater than hers. Yet the parallelism between Jesus and John isn’t there to set them up as competing with one another: they are both central to God’s plan.

❖ ***John’s not the only one for whom there’s a sense of being set apart from birth for a particular purpose. Has that happened to you or to anyone you know? How might it feel?***

This needn’t be in a spiritual context. Think about those born onto a farm that’s been in the family for generations, or where there’s a tradition of family members entering the same profession – or those born into the line of succession of a royal family.

❖ ***To be the advance party without wanting to compete with the main act – how hard or easy would that be?***

The church as forerunner

John's ministry is a metaphor for the Church. Our vocation, our calling, too is to prepare the way for one who is greater than we are, one whom the rest of the world does not know. Most people meet us before they meet Jesus. Most people know us as individuals (friends, relatives, colleagues, neighbours) before they connect with Jesus. And like John pointing to Jesus, the Church is called to be a signpost, not the destination.

❖ *How can we get people ready to meet Jesus?*

❖ *Are we helping people look beyond us to Christ, or are we unintentionally making ourselves the focus?*

In many ways the Church is the one standing out in the wilderness, calling out to people – and let's not forget that in the Bible the wilderness was often the place where people encountered God. John stood out – his lifestyle, message, and location were all counter-cultural.

❖ *In what ways should the Church be distinctive today? What does it mean to be "in the wilderness" in a modern context?*

❖ *What wildernesses (social, emotional, spiritual) are people in today—and how can we meet them there?*

❖ *In what sense are we forerunners?*

❖ *How can we be John the Baptist for people around us?*

THOUGHTS / QUESTIONS

2 Prophet



Imagine John standing there, by the river Jordan. He's there, in the wilderness, and people are coming out to listen to him. Words from Isaiah come to mind:

A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.' (Isaiah 40:3)

Isaiah was a prophet, and a prophet is someone who sees things others can't see and who says things others can't say, who speaks on behalf of someone else – on behalf of God. It's a ministry of communication. Sometimes this involves *foretelling*, declaring future events – ones that would definitely come to pass or things that would happen unless the people repented (like Jonah's proclamation that Ninevah would be destroyed in 40 days – except that the city repented and was saved, Jonah 3). At other times it was more *forthtelling*, addressing specific social, political, and religious circumstances in ancient Israel and offering a critique which came from God. And sometimes it was a bit of both. Prophets addressed both the people as a whole and their leaders – speaking truth to power.

In this part of Isaiah the people of Israel were in exile in Babylon. Trapped in a foreign land, they wondered if they would ever get home again. They wondered if God had deserted them. And then they hear those words. God hasn't forgotten them. God will take them out of exile and bring them home. It's a command to construct a road for God, to prepare a pathway for the coming in triumph. It's like when someone important is coming to town: all the roads get cleaned up. The gutters are fixed and the footpaths are re-sealed.

John links in to these experiences. He's come to prepare people for God's coming, to prepare the way of the Lord. And for all those people who came out to John in the wilderness, and for us also: how do we prepare a way on which God can come to us?

You start by clearing up the road. This is how Isaiah continues:

In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a
highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up
and every mountain and hill
shall be made low;
the uneven ground shall
become level
and the rough places a plain.
(Isaiah 40:3-4)



We're first called to clear a way in the wilderness, to get rid of the rubbish before we can move on. The wilderness, as always, is a place of encounter with God, a place of testing and purification, a place of preparation. We have come here, in answer to John's call, to clear a path to make the road for the Lord to travel on.

❖ ***What in our lives needs to be cleared out, straightened, before Jesus can come? And how do we do this?***

Repentance

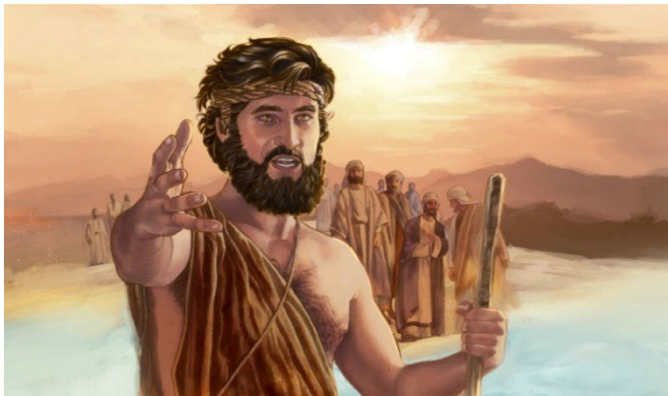
Back to Matthew again:

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." ... Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region around the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins.
(Matthew 3:1-2,5-6)

John is calling the people – calling us too – to repentance. What does “repentance” mean? The Greek word means “changing one’s mind.” Behind this is the Hebrew verb “to turn around” – having a change of heart, turning against the old life and the old way of being and starting out on something new; less about feeling bad, more about thinking differently. It’s a continuous process, an ongoing response to the will of God for our lives. But we have to start somewhere. And since John’s hearers respond to his message by confessing their sins, repentance is also about recognising one’s sins (the things we do wrong, or the good things we don’t do, all the ways in which we fall short of how God wants us to be) and admitting them publicly.

And the call is to both individual and collective repentance: the individual sins of which each of us is guilty, and the ways in which we participate (consciously or not) in systems which oppress or limit others. We’re called to change our individual minds and hearts and also to act differently as members of a group.

John called the people to a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. What did the people understand by his baptism? Its historical



background isn’t clear. Ritual washing was required by the law to remove ritual uncleanness which stemmed from a physical cause, and in Isaiah 1:16 cleansing (possibly in a metaphorical sense) is connected with repentance,

but this is fairly distant background. Self-administered baptism, or immersion in water, was done by converts to Judaism, possibly in John’s day – but this baptism was different, being offered to Jews, not to outsiders. And a key difference was that John administered it to the person being baptised (rather than it being self-administered). It was accompanied by an inward repentance and outward confession of sins: the baptism was a sign of God’s forgiveness. Repentance, baptism, and forgiveness of sins belong together. Baptism was a sign

of a life changed now and forever, a preparation for meeting the Lord who was coming.

So, since baptism was connected with repentance and forgiveness of sins, did Jesus need to be baptised? The issue is there in Matthew, where John only agrees to baptise Jesus after Jesus has made it clear that he wishes it, “for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness” (Matt 3:14-15)

The issue may also lie behind Luke’s treatment of Jesus baptism, where it isn’t at all clear that John baptised Jesus: it simply says “when Jesus also had been baptised and was praying, the heaven was



opened” etc (Luke 3:21) Anyone reading the Fourth Gospel without knowing Mark and Matthew wouldn’t necessarily assume that John baptised Jesus.

In Matthew, Jesus’ baptism establishes his identity, as the Beloved Son with whom God was well pleased, as the more powerful one coming after John, the one for whom John was the forerunner, and as a human being.

- ❖ ***What might it mean for us that Jesus was baptised?***
- ❖ ***Which part of who Jesus was (Beloved Son of God, the one who was coming, a human being) speaks most to you?***

John’s baptism for the people – “people of Jerusalem and all Judea” – is both a sign of their turning their minds and hearts and lives around and the mark of God’s forgiveness.

- ❖ ***What in our lives do we need to repent from? What do we need God’s forgiveness for?***
- ❖ ***In what ways do we need to turn our lives around? What needs to go, before we can prepare the way for God’s coming?***

John's message

John was a prophet – and prophets generally aren't known for their soft and gentle approach. Although he lived in the wilderness, out on the edges, his message is aimed at the whole of society, including those at the centre of religion, the Pharisees and Sadducees (influential Jewish religious groups; the Pharisees were lay leaders who prioritised strict observance of the Law, the Sadducees were priestly elites tied to the Temple). John's message was blunt.



But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Therefore, bear

fruit worthy of repentance, and do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. “I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I, and I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” (Matthew 3:7-12)

This is judgement, and a warning of more judgement to come. “Brood of vipers” isn't just a colourful insult (don't try this at home!) – it's accusing them of being poisonous, false teachers capable of hurting the people. We get a picture of snakes slithering away from a fire.

John here sounds like Old Testament prophets, criticising the false piety which performs the right religious actions while not really caring about God or how God wants other people to be treated (check out Isaiah 58:1-12). He says they assume being descended from Abraham is all they need to get God's approval – but their ancestry and ethnicity isn't going to be enough to save them from the wrath to come: they need to repent.

- ❖ ***What does true repentance look like in our lives today? How can we tell if our faith is more about outward appearances than inward transformation?***
- ❖ ***Are there ways we might be relying on our identity, background, or traditions to feel “safe” with God, rather than actively seeking to live justly and humbly before God?***

John's death

For Herod had arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because John had been telling him, “It is not lawful for you to have her.” Though Herod wanted to put him to death, he feared the crowd, because they regarded him as a prophet. But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company, and she pleased Herod so much that he promised on oath to grant her whatever she might ask. Prompted by her mother, she said, “Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter.” The king was grieved, yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he commanded it to be given; he sent and had John beheaded in the prison. His head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, who brought it to her mother. His disciples came and took the body and buried him; then they went and told Jesus. (Matthew 14:3-12)



John's confrontations with Herod are classic "speaking truth to power," in the mode of prophets seeing to call people back to living lives of justice and righteousness. He had criticised Herod's marriage to Herodias, who was his niece as well as the wife of his (still living) brother, contravening the Law (Leviticus 18:6, 20:21). This Herod is the son of the Herod who ruled at the time of Jesus' birth. John was clear that the Law, and the demands of the coming kingdom of God, applied to those in power as well as the ordinary people. His courage contrasts with Herod's fear – too afraid of losing face in front of his guests, he consents to the request for John's death.

- ❖ *John was a fearless prophet, not afraid to confront the powerful. Have you, or someone you know, ever had to do that? How did it feel?*
- ❖ *Where does the world need courageous prophets today?*
- ❖ *How can we be John the Baptist for people around us?*

THOUGHTS / QUESTIONS

3 Witness



In the Fourth Gospel, John's role as forerunner and baptiser is subordinate to his main task, which is to witness to Jesus. If we just had this Gospel, we'd be referring to him as "John the Witness" rather than "John the Baptist." Whereas the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) all begin with John as a forerunner, going before Jesus to get the people to repent and be ready to welcome him, the Gospel

of John – different in so many ways – is also different in how it treats the John the Baptist.

John even makes it into the Prologue to the Gospel:

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. (John 1: 6-9)

John's task, John's witness, is to lead people to believe in Jesus as the Son of God, to show them the Light who was coming into the world. It's clear, from what is said about John and what John says about himself, that Jesus is the important one. John is not the light of the world: Jesus is. The narrator tells us that "John testified to him and cried out, 'This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' "

At the beginning of the Fourth Gospel John witnesses to Jesus in a succession of encounters. On one day Jewish leaders come out of the city to find out who he is.

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” He confessed and did not deny it, but he confessed, “I am not the Messiah.” And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” He answered, “No.” Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ ” as the prophet Isaiah said.



Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, “Why, then, are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” John answered them, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandal.” This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing. (John 1:19-28)

John makes it clear to the religious leaders *who he is not*: he is not the Messiah, or Elijah, or the prophet. What he does say about himself comes in the familiar verse from Isaiah about one crying out “Make straight the way of the Lord.” In talking about what he does, John points to Jesus: “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” John’s humility is one of his key characteristics. When he says he’s not worthy to untie Jesus’ sandals (something usually done by a slave in that culture) this isn’t what we’d

call low self esteem. Humility is actually a healthy perspective of oneself that recognises value without being arrogant – value because as human beings created in the image of God we all have value – and is content to keep the focus on others rather than oneself.

❖ ***Think of a someone you'd describe as "humble" – what is distinctive about them? How do they act?***

❖ ***How can John's humility be an example for us?***

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him, but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel." And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Chosen One." (John 1:29-34)

John sees Jesus for the first time and makes it clear that before this he didn't know him, yet something enabled him to recognise the one he'd been talking about.

❖ ***How do you think John recognised Jesus?***



John hails Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. This is part of the distinctive proclamation of the Johannine John the Baptist. The image of the Lamb draws on a rich tradition including the Passover lamb whose blood

freed the Hebrew people from Egyptian slavery. Towards the end of the Fourth Gospel, we see Jesus dying unblemished like a Passover lamb, going to the cross at the very moment when the Passover lambs were being slaughtered: John's timing differs from that in the other Gospels in order to make this key point. Jesus – as God and as human being – is the means by which we are freed from the sin and the systems which oppress us. And part of John's witness to Jesus is to recognise him as "the Son of God."

John's witness to Jesus as the Lamb of God is repeated on day three, and that witness leads two of his disciples (yes, John had disciples, people who gathered around him and were taught by him) to leave him and follow Jesus instead.

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!' The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. (John 1: 35-37)



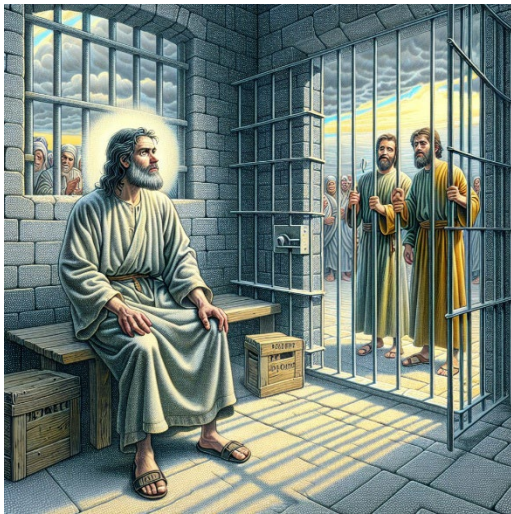
One of the two who heard John speak and followed Jesus was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. It's interesting that in this Gospel Jesus' first disciples follow him not as a result of Jesus calling them (as in Matthew 4:18-22) but as a result of John's witness.

❖ ***What do you think it was like for John, to see his disciples leave him for Jesus?***

John's role as a witness to Jesus is emphasised again later in the Fourth Gospel when Jesus goes across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptising earlier, and many came to him and said "John performed no sign, but everything that John said about this man was true" (John 10: 40-2). As a result of this, we're told many believed in Jesus there. Another of John's characteristics is that he points away from himself, to Jesus. He describes himself as "the friend of the

bridegroom” (Jn 3:29) – the one who stands by and sees the bridegroom get all the attention and rejoices for him. John says of himself, in relation to Jesus, “He must increase, but I must decrease.” He consistently denies exalted titles for himself in favour of directing the attention to Jesus.

Later John is imprisoned by Herod, and hearing about what Jesus was doing he sends people to get more information.



When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with a skin disease are cleansed, the deaf

hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.” (Matthew 11:2-6)

John seems troubled and uncertain. What’s led to this? There’s two possibilities – one’s the psychological effect of being in prison: alone, forgotten, and beginning to doubt things he was previously sure about. Out of his sense of discouragement he sends people to question Jesus.

Another possibility is that John’s heard about Jesus’ acts of compassion and healing and perhaps thinks that the Messiah’s task should be to carry out the final judgement, laying the axe to the root of the tree and burning every tree that’s not bearing fruit (see Matthew 3:10-12). Jesus isn’t turning out to be the sort of Messiah John was expecting. So Jesus clarifies what he’s been doing, and he does it in terms of two texts from Isaiah (35:5-6 and 29:18-19). These highlight what Jesus is doing for the blind, the lame, the lepers, the

deaf, the dead and the poor: what he's doing fulfils expectations about the Messiah (the one who is to come) from the Scriptures. John's doubts and uncertainties lead to a fuller picture of who Jesus was: even in his questioning he ends up pointing us towards Jesus.

- ❖ *Do we maybe think God should be doing more about stopping wrong-doing and punishing criminals?*
- ❖ *Are we surprised by some of the things Jesus did?*

John as Witness

Throughout the Fourth Gospel especially John is portrayed as the ideal witness to Christ. He is what all Christians – and not just preachers and missionaries and evangelists – should be like: bearing witness to Jesus, pointing away from himself and towards Jesus.

- ❖ *How can we be John the Baptist for people around us?*
- ❖ *How can the Church as a whole be like John the Baptist?*
- ❖ *In what ways can we witness to the Light?*
- ❖ *How has this Advent Study prepared you to welcome Christ – as the baby in Bethlehem, and as the One who will come again at the end of time?*

THOUGHTS / QUESTIONS

Closing Worship

You may like to close each session by praying together. Here are some possible prayers, taken from *A New Zealand Prayer Book / He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa*: the Collects for Advent 2 and Advent 3 in each of the three Lectionary years.

Almighty God,
you sent your servant John the Baptist
to prepare the way for the coming of your Son;
grant that those who proclaim your word
may so guide our feet into the way of peace,
that we may stand with confidence before him
when he comes in his glorious kingdom;
through Jesus Christ our Judge and our Redeemer. Amen.

God for whom we wait and watch,
you sent John the Baptist
to prepare for the coming of your Son:
give us courage to speak the truth
even to the point of suffering.
This we ask through Christ our Saviour. Amen.

Praise and honour to you living God
for John the Baptist,
and for all those voices crying in the wilderness
who prepare your way.
May we listen when a prophet speaks your word,
and obey;
for the sake of Jesus Christ our Redeemer. Amen.

Terror and doom, and wrath to come,
John your herald preached
to bring us to repentance;
open our eyes, almighty God,
show us our sin, and grant us forgiveness.
Hear this prayer for your love's sake. Amen.

Almighty God,
you sent your servant John the Baptist
to prepare the way for the coming of your Son;
grant that those who proclaim your word
may so guide our feet into the way of peace,
that we may stand with confidence before him
when he comes in his glorious kingdom;
through Jesus Christ our Judge and our Redeemer. Amen.

God our strength and our hope,
grant us the courage of John the Baptist,
constantly to speak the truth,
boldly to rebuke vice
and patiently to suffer for the truth's sake;
in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

