

Order of Service

12th September 2021

Welcome, notices & birthday box.

Today we are going to start a new Bible series based around the story of John the Baptist. John is a huge figure in the New Testament even though doesn't take up as much line space as others. John's role was to proclaim the Messiah's coming.

If you've ever been to a concert you'll know that you often get to hear a warm up act, to get everyone prepared to welcome the main featured act. John's role wasn't just to proclaim Jesus' coming but to prepare people spiritually for what God was going to do.

I believe that learning about John will help us as we find our stride again as a church to embrace all that God wants to do in the next phase of life as a church. And this morning that happens as we enter God's presence and praise Him for all He is to us.

Let's prepare ourselves as we enter God's presence by saying these words together

Throughout the ages, Christians have gathered to worship God together.

We gather to sing, to pray and to rejoice.

We gather to ask God for healing for our brokenness.

We gather to help each other through hard times, and celebrate in the good times.

We gather to learn and study and discuss God's holy word.

We gather to learn how to tell others about this place, about our God, and about the wonderful things God does in our lives.

We gather together to ask the Lord's blessings.

Let us sing praise to our Lord, the almighty King of creation.

290 Jesus is Lord, creations voice proclaims it

Father

As we come before You this morning we thank You for caring for us even though we never deserved it or could deserve it. Thank You that in your love, you showed us mercy and grace as You sent Your own dear Son to die for us. Through our faith and trust in His finished work on the Cross, we proclaim Him Lord in our hearts and in this place today. May your Spirit open our hearts and minds as we encounter You in our worship today. Open our hearts and minds we pray to the challenge and to the encouragement of Your word.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

The next song is based on a psalm where the writer longed after the presence of God in His life. Is that our desire this morning? Remember that this song is also a prayer.

27 As the deer

In our first song, the last verse said

*Jesus is Lord! God sent His Holy Spirit
To show by works of power
That Jesus is Lord.*

The original writer, David Mansell originally wrote it as “God sends His Holy Spirit, to show by works of power.” In one sense the Songs of Fellowship (and other hymnals) change to the past tense correctly reflects the fact that the Spirit was poured out on the church at Pentecost but Mansell was after praising God for those times we experience the Holy Spirit in power, in worship, in sign gifts, in amazing answers to prayer and in miraculous acts; and our voices cry out “Jesus is Lord!” in response..

How often we forget that God has amazing power, not just in amazing manifestations of the Spirit, but in the evidence of changed lives. How often we forget things we have seen and experienced as Christians, as we get caught up in the humdrum of life or in the demotivating experiences of Lockdown (if you weren’t demotivated by Lockdown, then give God praise!).

God has the capacity to surprise such as this reporter from Channel 9 in Australia, who is not a Christian and a sceptic of things miraculous when he visited a healing meeting led by Australian Evangelist John Mellor who has a well known ministry of healing:

VIDEO: John Mellor

Father, we thank you that you have the capacity to surprise us. Please open our hearts and minds afresh to being surprised. May our prayers not be there as a speculative hope but fill us with expectation that You act as Jesus promised to prayers of faith as we seek to obey Your will and Your way. We ask this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Intercessory Prayers

These are on the Weekly Sheet

In Psalm 119, the psalmist says of God that Your word is a lamp to my feet and light to my path. As we open God’s word today, let’s pray that as we sing our next song.

1410 Lamp unto my feet

Reading Luke 1: 8-17 and 67-80

Or reading today is probably familiar to all of us but it’s more commonly read at Advent. Zechariah is married to Elizabeth are an older couple and they have never been able to have children despite wanting them. Zechariah is a priest in the Temple at Jerusalem, and our story begins there

Luke 1: 8-17

8 Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, 9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10 And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside.

11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. 13 But the angel said to him: 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. 14 He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, 15 for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. 16 He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous – to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.'

Indeed, Elizabeth does become pregnant in old age and she eventually gives birth to a son: John. Zechariah asked for a sign that the promise of a son was true and he got struck dumb until John was born! At the circumcision of John, Zechariah's voice is released and he utters these prophetic words.

67 His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

68 'Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come to his people and redeemed them.

69 He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David

70 (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),

71 salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us –

72 to show mercy to our ancestors
and to remember his holy covenant,

73 the oath he swore to our father Abraham:

74 to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and to enable us to serve him without fear

75 in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

76 And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,

77 to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,

78 because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven

79 to shine on those living in darkness

and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace.'

80 And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel.

Sermon – A Special Child

A BIT OF A SURPRISE - ZECHARIAH

Our God is someone who surprises us. On reflection God's actions shouldn't surprise those of us who know Him because He's a God who reveals to us the mysteries of His will through Scripture and by His Spirit. But that day in the Temple was a true shock for Zechariah. To get to serve in the Temple at the Altar of Incense was a super privilege to priests. It may have only been one time in a career for a priest to be selected and many didn't win the lottery for it. Apart from the unique role of the High Priest which was truly something else, burning incense was the most privileged jobrrr in the priesthood.

ZECHARIAH'S BIG MOMENT

Why? Take a look at this plan of the Temple. The most holy part of the Temple was the Holy of Holies, where only the High Priest could go once a year. Then there was the Holy Place next to it, where only priests could go to burn incense – and they usually went alone as Zechariah did. Outside that was the area where sacrifices were made and burnt by the priests and where Jewish men could go and pray. On the level below was where Jewish women could pray. Gentiles were allowed no further than the Court of the Gentiles, open to all to pray – or do trade in sacrificial animals.

A BIT OF A SURPRISE – ZECHARIAH

So Zechariah was in the Holy Place alone, burning incense, when he found that he was not alone. No-one had walked through the door, this guy was just there and that of course was the angel of the Lord. That was a shock to Zechariah and even more shocking to learn that he was to have a son by a wife that was too old to conceive and never had anyway. Shades of Abraham and Sarah here – intentionally I think. They had always wanted children and now their prayers were answered and like Abraham, the miracle child was to be special – to be a child of promise as Isaac was.

In scripture we often find that when God raises up significant people, it coincides with significant or miraculous occurrences that confirm to the world the power and purposes of God are being served.

In the same chapter we read of the virgin birth of Jesus being announced. Look back in the OT and we see the same - Abraham and the birth of Isaac, Moses and the burning bush, Joseph and his interpretation of dreams, David and Goliath or in the New Testament we have

of course Jesus – you can make a long list of God’s acts through Him, Paul on the Damascus road – and so on and so forth.

As a mentioned earlier, Zechariah astonishingly asked for a sign and got 9 months mute for his lame enquiry – he was going to find out soon if God was in it or not! Or do we want to show him a little sympathy? How often like Zechariah, we have prayed and prayed for something and not got it straight away and then when we do, we have a sort of resigned disbelief when God acts.

A PURPOSE AND CALLING

I believe that all who are in Christ have a purpose and calling by virtue of trusting and following Jesus. Think of what we have become in Christ: children of God, friends of God, citizens of His kingdom, a member of the Body of Christ, united with Christ, filled with the Spirit etc. etc. In Christ we have a purpose, and that is to serve the purposes of God right here, right now.

Not only do we have a future and a purpose, God calls and equips us to serve Him in our present situation. Whatever passage you want to chose on the role of believers in the church and in the world, we’ll find that each one of us is called and equipped by God for service wherever we are. And as I said last time, that calling and equipping may change over time, but as long as we live on Earth, we never retire from our calling, although calling can and does change over time.

JOHN: A SPECIAL CHILD WITH A SPECIAL CALL

So what can we learn about our calling from John the Baptist? Even though our call may be very different from John’s, there is still much we can learn from him. We can start by saying that even though John had a special role in the history of human salvation, to us we are all special to God. He loves us he knows us through and trough. We can learn how being special to God works through His purposes for John

A special relationship with God

John had a unique relationship with God: here’s what verse 15 said ... *he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born.* God had a purpose for him – one of usefulness to Him which we will explore more fully in a later week. Most notably, the Holy Spirit would fill him even before birth – he would be special right from the start. Why the relationship was special was due entirely to God. By His grace He made that relationship special to start with.

A special lifestyle

John the Baptist is also remembered for his distinctive lifestyle. Here's two verses from the passage and one from Mark's gospel:

He is never to take wine or other fermented drink (v15)

And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel. (v80)

John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt round his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. (Mark 1: 6)

That's well weird and it is reminiscent to me and to other commentators of someone in OT times who would have taken the Nazirite vow. If you've not heard of that it was a vow to consecrate oneself to God. The Nazirite comes from the Hebrew word *nazir*, simply means "to be separated or consecrated." It was something open to men or women and they would consecrate themselves for a set period. Sometimes Nazirites were ascetics (people who separated themselves from the hunky dory of life to spend time with God – like John. They also grew their hair and avoided dead human bodies. At the end of the vow period, the Nazirite would have their head shaved and the hair would be placed on the altar at the Temple.

John had a specific calling to be a forerunner for the Messiah to announce and prepare His coming. And when Jesus came, his own response was He must increase and I must decrease – his work was over.

Interestingly, if he indeed was a Nazirite, he never got to present his hair for the altar – he had an altogether closer cut and his head ended up on a platter!

So, God made His relationship with John special but John freely consecrated himself to God in response to the grace shown him. But there's one more thing.

[A special message](#)

Finally, John was given a special message to speak to the Jews. I have already alluded to it: here it is again.

16 He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous – to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.'

I will deal with the Elijah bit and other detail later, but at this point I would say that John obeyed God and as prophesied, became who Jesus called "the greatest of the prophets" as he grew a large following of people preparing themselves for the coming Messiah.

God called, John consecrated Himself to God and he obeyed – and God used him mightily in being the forerunner announcing the coming Messiah.

There is so much in John that challenges us I believe as we reflect on his story.

Firstly.. **We are special to God:**

You may remember the song I'm special by Graham Kendrick that we sing with the children. *I'm special because God has loved me, For He gave the best thing that He had to save me; His own Son Jesus, crucified to take the blame for all the bad things I have done.*

A simple song with a simple truth. Let me just illustrate how like John the Baptist we are special to God. Like John, God in His grace made the first move, gave His own dear Son to die for us and gives us a calling and a purpose:

WE HAVE A CALLING AND A PURPOSE

He chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will – to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. (Ephesians 1:4-6)

We are also made part of the body of Christ where the Spirit equips us to play our part. That is the privilege that God has brought us into – we are a special people. Never think you are insignificant or unimportant. Each of us is special and if like John we do what God calls us to do, then be ready for a bit of a surprise.

WE ARE CALLED TO BE A HOLY PEOPLE

We are also called to be a holy people who consecrate and commit ourselves to serving His purposes. Perhaps we can think of Romans 12:1-2 as being our version of the Nazirite vow, which God calls us to:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Our only reasonable response to God's grace is to seek to have lives that are holy and pleasing to Him. For as long as we live, we can make a difference as we seek to do God's will. Finally,

WE ARE CALLED TO BRING GOOD NEWS TO OTHERS

We are called to bring Good News to others: Here's the verses:

Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.' Matt 28:19-20

This is Jesus' last command to the disciples and therefore to the church. It wasn't a gentle suggestion or a piece of advice. It was a command. John's commission was to announce the coming of the Messiah, call for repentance and his work continued until Jesus arrived. Our command is to announce the return of the Messiah, call for repentance and will continue to the end of the age when Jesus returns. Sounds rather similar doesn't it?

BEING A SPECIAL PEOPLE

These are changed times for us, but the heart of who we are and our mission hasn't. It's time to re-affirm who we are in Christ, follow Him, and carry out our mission. Are we ready? Let's seek His mind and will. Let's pray.

PRAYER

Father

It has been difficult for many of us these last months to focus on anything but the immediacy of dealing with the pandemic and the restrictions it brought.

FINISH CLOSING PRAYER

1757 Everyone needs compassion

Blessing

As people of faith we have gathered for worship.
As people of faith we now return to the world.
Go out to share the story of faith,
the story of life, with the world around you.
We share the faith in word and in deed,
in speech and in action.

As you go out to give a living witness,
as you go out to testify to God's love active in the world,
go knowing that God goes with you,
sharing the laughter and the hope, the fears and the tears.
Thanks be to God! Amen.

May the Lord shine on you (Andy Rayner)

ITEMS FOR REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

Reading Luke 1: 8-17 and 67-80 again.

1. Have there been times in your life where God has really surprised you? How did that affect your walk as a Christian?
2. It could be argued that Elizabeth getting pregnant was enough of a sign that what the angel said was true, so why did Zechariah ask for a sign in addition to that? What did his being mute accomplish? Should we be asking for signs, wonders and miracles? If so, what do we think they will achieve for us and others? Think of how most people come to Christ.
3. Look at verses 67-80. How much was the prophecy of Zechariah for us now and how much was fulfilled at the time?
4. Think of ways in which we are special to God and think of what verses in the New testament may support that? How does our knowing we are special to God influence our walk with Him?