

The Parish of Christchurch

The Priory Church of the Holy Trinity, Christchurch
St George, Jumpers • St John at Purewell



for Sunday 20 June, 2021

Dear Friends,

In the coming days, the Church will commemorate the man whom Jesus described as 'the greatest': no, not Muhammed Ali, but John the Baptist, whose birth we celebrate on June 24th. Although, famously, John the Baptist felt unworthy to baptize Jesus, or even tie his sandals for him, Jesus described John with honour and respect: "Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist ..." (Matthew 11.11a).

The greatness of which Jesus spoke was concerned with John's unique role in salvation history: not only was he Jesus' cousin; he was the one chosen by God to be the forerunner of the long-promised Messiah. John's mission was to prepare the way – to prepare the world – for Jesus' ministry.

It is, in fact, unusual to celebrate a saint's birth: normally, their feast is kept on the day of their death. With John the Baptist, however, though his death is indeed commemorated, it is his birth that is the major feast. Nor is it hard to imagine why the early Church (this festival dates back to the sixth century) chose to mark the Baptist's birth on June 24th, six months after Christmas and three months after the Feast of the Annunciation on March 25th. At the Annunciation, Mary was told by Gabriel that her cousin, Elizabeth, was six months pregnant; so June 24th is about right to celebrate the Baptist's birthday.

Our partners in San Lorenzo in Florence will certainly be celebrating on Wednesday, not because San Giovanni Battista (like most things, his name sounds better in Italian!) is the patron saint of their Basilica and parish, but because he is the patron saint of the city of Florence. And although some of the traditional aspects of the Florentine June 24 celebrations have been postponed because of the pandemic (not least this year's final of 'Calcio Storico Fiorentino', the traditional Florentine ball game whose roots go back to the 16th century and appears to be a mix of football, rugby and all-in wrestling – not for the faith-hearted), there will certainly be a Civic Mass in the morning and, after dark, some spectacular fireworks.

It is to John the Baptist that the octagonal Baptistry in the heart of Florence is dedicated. Monsignor Timothy Verdon, when he gave a talk in the Priory nearly four years ago, described that in the early days anyone wanting to reach that Baptistry had to go through a graveyard – a potent symbol of the journey through death to life in Christ. Timothy also explained that the octagonal baptistry, and within it the octagonal font, symbolised the 'eighth day', the day of resurrection and of the eternal life that exists beyond the seven days of the week.

Holding these elements together, although John the Baptist's unique ministry was completed with the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, we can see in him a model for the way all of us can play our part in 'preparing the way' for Christ.

The reality of this and every parish across the country is that the majority of our neighbours will never have encountered Jesus Christ, except perhaps as a swear word. And as Paul wrote to the Romans: "How are people to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? (Romans 10.14) The crucified, risen and ascended Jesus still needs people to "make straight the way of the Lord", to prepare his way. Which means us.

All mission starts here. Last Sunday, in his excellent sermon on Mark 4.26-34, Archdeacon Richard suggested that the various parables about seed and sowing are not primarily about growth, at least not as we often understand it:

“What I’m suggesting is that the parables and teaching of Jesus are not about a business or management guide on how to grow your church. Jesus is not providing us with a process for growth. What he is doing is sharing a vision of what is possible with God, a vision of what the world can be ... so we are encouraged to see a bigger future, God’s future, with foundations that are built in trust in God, rather than on any human construct.”

In other words, all growth, all mission, depends entirely on God; and when we bustle around to produce schemes and programmes and mission strategies, we miss the crucial point that Jesus’ parables confirm time and again: that God gives the growth. Our role – and it’s vitally important – is to work as the Spirit directs to do what we can to ensure that the conditions are in place so God’s growth may happen. Our role is to prepare the way; and then, like John the Baptist, to get out of the way and let God do what only God can.

Alongside avoiding looking for “a business of management guide on how to grow your church”, we can also learn from John the Baptist’s total lack of self-promotion. Classically, images of John the Baptist depict him pointing away from himself, so that, even if Jesus is not in the painting, we can still get the point. So, in John I, we find John the Baptist questioned by priest and Levites from Jerusalem: ‘Who are you?’ He confessed and did not deny it, but 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.’

John the Baptist was, in effect, saying “No, it’s not me; and it’s not about me.” It was always about Jesus. St Paul would have approved and agreed: “For we preach not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake” (2 Corinthians 4.5).

Our calling is to witness to the life and light we have found in Christ, to prepare His way in our communities today, by how we live and how we serve, as well as by what we say; to point others to him; to remember it’s never about us; to stand for truth, no matter what the cost; and to live lives marked and transformed by repentance. May it be so.

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Confirmation 2021

It has just been agreed that Bishop Debbie will come to the Priory on Sunday 17 October for a Confirmation Service, which will be open both to our own parish and to other parishes in the Deanery. This service will be held at 2.00pm. As usual, we shall offer a Confirmation Course in preparation for this important event.

At this stage, it’s looking likely that the course (or courses, if required) will start at the beginning of September and will continue after the Confirmation Service itself. If anyone is interested in joining a Confirmation Course, or perhaps wanting a ‘refresher’ at this stage of your Christian journey, then please contact me on vicar@christchurchpriory.org, or talk to me or Fr Richard.

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Next Sunday, June 27, at the 10.00am Eucharist at the Priory, we shall be celebrating the 50th anniversary of Fr Graham Newton’s ordination to the priesthood. As well as the Revd Angel Newton, their children Sarah and Andrew will also be participating in the service.

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In his first words recorded in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus said (in effect) that the Kingdom of Heaven was now breaking in. John the Baptist’s ministry of preparing the way for Jesus and preaching a baptism of repentance, that work had come to an end. For us, as for Christians everywhere, the invitation is to apply the same principles as John, but in the context of the Kingdom of God and the reality of Jesus today.

May God give us grace to follow the example of John the Baptist, the great preparer. With every blessing,

