



**Baptist or Reformer?**

**Rev Richard Bonifant**

Year C, Advent 2

Malachi 3: 1-4, Luke 3: 1-6

8 December 2024

In 1959 the Australia racing driver Jack Brabham was one race away from being world champion. In the final race of the season all was going well, until the final lap when Brabham's car ran out of petrol. He was in the lead, he only had a quarter of a mile of track to go, but his chances of winning went up in smoke. That was until he did something that had never happened in motor sport before. Brabham got out of his car and began to push. Cars continued to fly past, as he pushed half a tonne of metal down the final stretch of road. When he reached the finish line he collapsed in exhaustion and passed out. It turned out that Brabham came forth in that race, which gave him enough points to be declared world Champion.

There is something in that story about tenacity, about not accepting failure and continuing to fight even when common sense suggests giving up. I think that the person we remember as John the Baptist was a person of a similar tenacious disposition.

We know remarkably little about John the Baptist. His style of dress, wild animal skins, suggests that he may have been a type of ascetic. His confrontation with Herod Antipas certainly tells us something of his tenacity and his unwavering attitude even when facing a person significantly more powerful than himself. In this morning's reading from the Gospel of Luke, the writer of that account is very clear that John was also a herald of the coming messiah.

The real clue to John's motivations is found in the synoptic Gospel's which all focus clearly on John as the baptiser. Baptism in our tradition is full of meaning, so it is good for us to think back to where that long tradition began. It began with John, in the Judean

wildness, and offered people the chance to return to God, because that is what repentance is, a turning back to God.

The question we don't often bother to ask, is what was John asking people to turn away from, in order to turn back to God. A good Sunday school answer would be sin. We turn from sin back to God. But I'm not sure that is the answer John would have given. Partly because sin as a concept includes a huge diversity of ideas, which vary considerably throughout the bible. I suspect that John was not speaking of broad amorphous concepts, such a sin. Rather John had some very specific issues in mind, when telling his community about their need to improve their relationship with God.

It has been suggested that perhaps John was connected to a Jewish community called the Essenes. They were a Jewish group like others named in the bible such as the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Except unlike those groups there is no mention of them in the bible. They are mentioned in a few histories we have from the first century, but beyond that, very little was known about them until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1946.

The story goes that a young shepherd walking through some hills near the dead sea threw a stone into a cave and heard a strange breaking sound. He went into the cave and found he had broken a jar with an old scroll in it. As news of the discovery broke, archaeologists came to the area and eventually uncovered some 972 scrolls and fragments dating back to the biblical period.

One theory is that these documents were hidden by the Essenes before the Jewish Roman war. Some of the documents suggest that the Essenes believed themselves to be a reforming movement, different to the other Jewish sects. The Essenes had separated themselves from the rest of Jewish society, both physically and socially. Rather than engaging with the politics in Jerusalem, the Essenes had established a type of monastic community near the Dead Sea where the scrolls were discovered. So, they lived apart from the other Jewish sects, but also began to live in a way that was different to the rest of Jewish society. By doing so the Essenes

believed that they were recovering a form of Judaism closer to that of the Israelites back at the time God had established a covenant with them.

Like many reforming movements the Essenes believed that they were getting back to basics. They rejected what they perceived as more recent developments in their faith tradition, in order to return to a simpler existence. At the time of Jesus this meant that the Essenes were among those who rejected the style of worship, as well as the politics, found within the Jewish temple in Jerusalem.

If John was influenced by the Essenes, in even a small way, the baptism he offered starts to look like a political activity as much as it was a spiritual one. The cleansing John offered through baptism can be seen as a challenge and critique of the temple practices of Jerusalem. Those visiting the temple were required to ritually bathe before entering the temple mount, and had to do so every time they went. John, by comparison offered a one-off cleansing that did not require repetition. Perhaps John was offering a reformed purification ritual in contrast to mainstream Jewish practice of the time. What this suggests is that there is an aspect of John's character that we have lost sight of. John was not simply the herald of Christ, but was a reformer of the Jewish faith.

It is no real surprise that the mainstream church has played down John's status as a reformer. Reformers typically don't sit well within a political structure. They ask too many uncomfortable questions. Reformers dare to suggest that the status quo may not be good enough, and that there might be a better alternative. Reformers often become unpopular because they advocate for change, but change comes with sacrifice, and those who hold power seldom want to give it up for the greater good.

It is for this reason that many of the great reformers of church tradition have often had to leave their own church tradition in order to find a better way. Martin Luther did not intend to leave the Roman Catholic church, rather he wanted a discussion about how Roman Catholicism could get back to basics. Closer to home, John

Wesley the founder of Methodism argued throughout his life that his teaching was a revival movement within the Anglican church. And yet following his death Methodism came to believe that it had to separate from the Church of England in order to flourish.

We live in a time where much of the growth within the Christian community occurs in more conservative Christian denominations. There are those who believe that to be a Christian one must sign up to a rigid set of beliefs. What this ignores is the simple truth that there is a great diversity of Christian belief. Thank God that there are many ways to follow Christ. Some believe in the virgin birth, some of us, well, let's just say we hold that one fairly lightly. There are those who suggest they know exactly what occurred through the events of Good Friday, and some of us continue to wrestle with the crucifixion and resurrection and what it all might mean.

My point is that there have always been those within religious traditions who raise questions. Those who dare to hold up supposedly sacred ideas and ask, is this really what God wants for us? What the example of John the Baptist tells us is that such questioning and searching is a sacred role that belongs within our communities. Reformers are the people who remind us that as comfortable as we might be, we still know little of the depth of God's love for all of us. They are the people who remind us that we continue to be on a journey, and that we are still far off from our true destination. As good as things might be for us, there are still so many who are estranged from God, who are excluded and denied full participation in the life of the church.

So, who are you going to be? Are you going to be the comfortable Christian who knows who they are and what they believe? Or, will you dare to ask hard questions of yourself and of others as we continue to seek the deeper truths God is holding out before us? Amen.