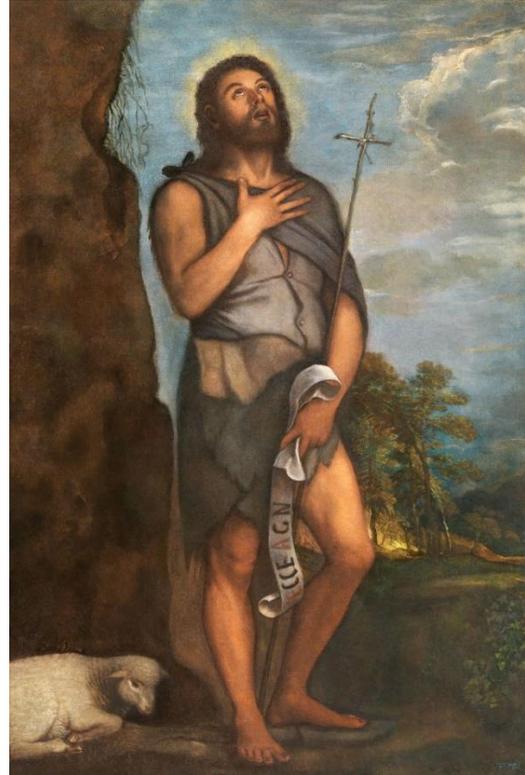


## Feast of the Birth of St John the Baptist (24 June)

### A Service of the Word for St John's Patronal Festival, 21 June 2020

*At midsummer, six months before the birth of Jesus, the Church celebrates the birth of his forerunner John. St Luke recounts the story: the old priest Zechariah is told that his wife will bear a son with a unique vocation; Elizabeth greets her relative Mary, also pregnant; Zechariah names his son John and praises God in the poem now known as the Benedictus. We too rejoice today in the life of our parish and its church, even in their constrained form in these times. And we listen again to the disturbing voice of the austere prophet and baptiser in the desert, calling 'Repent, for the kingdom of God is close!' ...*



Hieronymus Bosch

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with us all. **Amen.**

A voice cries out:

'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 be made low;  
the uneven ground shall become level,  
and the rough places a plain.

Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,  
and all the people shall see it together,  
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel,  
who has come to his people and set them free.

Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

**Blessed be God for ever.**

John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' In the wilderness of our world, let us too repent of our sins and resolve to live in the way of Christ.

*Silence for self-examination, followed by prayer for forgiveness:*

In the wilderness we find your grace;  
you love us with an everlasting love.  
Lord have mercy.

**Lord have mercy.**

There is none but you to uphold our cause;  
our sin cries out and our guilt is great.  
Christ have mercy.

**Christ have mercy.**

Heal us, O Lord, and we shall be healed;  
restore us and we shall know your joy.  
Lord have mercy.

**Lord have mercy.**

*Prayer of absolution, then we rejoice in the glory of God ...*

**Glory to God in the highest,  
and peace to his people on earth.  
Lord God, heavenly King,  
almighty God and Father,  
we worship you, we give you thanks,  
we praise you for your glory.  
Lord Jesus Christ, only Son of the Father,  
Lord God, Lamb of God,  
you take away the sin of the world:  
have mercy on us;  
you are seated at the right hand of the Father:  
receive our prayer.  
For you alone are the Holy One,  
you alone are the Lord,  
you alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ,  
with the Holy Spirit,  
in the glory of God the Father. Amen.**

*Silent prayer, followed by the collect for the day:*

Almighty God,  
by whose providence your servant John the Baptist was wonderfully  
born,  
and sent to prepare the way of your Son our Saviour by the preaching  
of repentance:  
lead us to repent according to his preaching  
and, after his example, constantly to speak the truth,  
boldly to rebuke vice,  
and patiently suffer for the truth's sake;  
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,  
who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

*A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah:*

Comfort, O comfort my people,  
says your God.  
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
and cry to her  
that she has served her term,  
that her penalty is paid,  
that she has received from the  
LORD's hand  
double for all her sins.

A voice cries out:  
'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 be  
made low;  
the uneven ground shall become  
level,  
and the rough places a plain.  
Then the glory of the LORD shall  
be revealed,  
and all people shall see it  
together,  
for the mouth of the LORD has  
spoken.'

A voice says, 'Cry out!'  
And I said, 'What shall I cry?'  
All people are grass,

their constancy is like the flower  
of the field.  
The grass withers, the flower fades,  
when the breath of the LORD  
blows upon it;  
surely the people are grass.  
The grass withers, the flower fades;  
but the word of our God will  
stand for ever.  
Get you up to a high mountain,  
O Zion, herald of good tidings;  
lift up your voice with strength,  
O Jerusalem, herald of good  
tidings,  
lift it up, do not fear;  
say to the cities of Judah,  
'Here is your God!'  
See, the Lord GOD comes with  
might,  
and his arm rules for him;  
his reward is with him,  
and his recompense before him.  
He will feed his flock like a  
shepherd;  
he will gather the lambs in  
his arms,  
and carry them in his bosom,  
and gently lead the mother  
sheep.

**Thanks be to God**

*From Psalm 85, with the response, **Show us your mercy, O Lord***

Show us your mercy, O Lord, and grant us your salvation.  
I will listen to what the Lord God will say,  
for he shall speak peace to his people and to the faithful,  
that they turn not again to folly. **R**

Truly, his salvation is near to those who fear him,  
that his glory may dwell in our land.  
Mercy and truth are met together,  
righteousness and peace have kissed each other. **R**

Truth shall spring up from the earth and righteousness look down from  
heaven.  
The Lord will indeed give all that is good,  
and our land will yield its increase.  
Righteousness shall go before him  
and direct his steps in the way. **R**

*Gospel acclamation:*

Alleluia, alleluia!  
You, child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High,  
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way,  
to give his people knowledge of salvation,  
by the forgiveness of all their sins.

**Alleluia!**

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Luke:  
**Glory to you, O Lord.**

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, 'No; he is to be called John.' They said to her, 'None of your relatives has this name.' Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing-tablet and wrote, 'His name is John.' And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbours, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, 'What then will this child become?' For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

**Praise to you, O Christ!**



*The Birth of St John Baptist, by Artemisia Gentileschi*

We've come to the longest day of the year. Midsummer, a time for picnics and beaches and white wine and tennis ... except that this year it is all curtailed. Travel restricted, Wimbledon cancelled, families isolated. Instead of summer freedom, fear is abroad in the world: fear of sickness, fear of death, fear of contact, fear of unemployment.

So our summer paradise is more like a desert. For a desert is empty, a place where you are stripped of the familiar comforts of civilisation. But, even in that emptiness, a voice? 'A voice cries out: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord!' The words are from a prophet writing in Babylon six centuries before, but the first Christians identified the voice as that of the wild desert prophet called John.

The Church celebrates John's birth in midsummer as it is six months before the birth of Jesus. St Luke tells the story (you don't find it in the other gospels). The angel announces the forthcoming birth of a son to the old priest Zechariah.

Six months on, his wife Elizabeth is visited by her relative Mary, who is also pregnant and who bursts out in joy with the song we call 'Magnificat'. Then the child is born and named John. Zechariah's speech returns, and he too rejoices in the song we call 'Benedictus': 'Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who has come to his people and set them free.'

These eruptions of praise occur – and are repeated morning and evening in the Church's Daily Prayer – because, through these children John and Jesus, God comes near. In their prophetic words and in their courageous lives and deaths, there is hope, there is freedom from fear. 'In the tender compassion of our God,' sings Zechariah, 'the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.'

But such closeness of the unseen God may be unnerving. 'What will this child become?' ask the people of Judea when they hear of John's birth. He certainly becomes a strange patron saint for us at St John's; barely respectable, out there in the wild with his shaggy hair – well, we have that much in common, in these days without hairdressers. But worse, his scruffy clothing of camel hair, his revolting diet of locusts. John's speech is sharp and offensive, and he ends up with his head cut off after challenging the king.

Is this our model? Isn't the desert of a Covid world enough, without going further into the wilderness?

Well, the opening cry of John's preaching is 'Repent!' Not just to terrible sinners. According to the gospels, he's addressing all the crowds who come out to the wilderness: tax-collectors, soldiers, priests. All are called to repent.

Now that's not a call to mope in remorse and self-loathing. 'Repentance' means 'turning round': changing your direction, changing your mind. Repentance is positive and joyful. It has nothing to do with talk of 'miserable sinners' and 'intolerable burdens', with all that pathological verbiage from the old Prayer Book that has done such damage to the mental health of generations of English-speaking people. Repentance is not looking in; repentance is looking out, and looking up.

For John's whole refrain is not just 'Repent', but 'Repent, for the kingdom of God is near' (Jesus begins his own preaching with the very same words). Turn round, look out, look up to the rule of God: that is, to the possibility, no, the reality of a new life and a new world, where peace and justice are not just ideals or slogans but our common habitat. 'Prepare the way of the Lord!'

To undertake this change of heart, to inhabit a world of justice and peace, it is perhaps necessary to enter the desert – the desert of Judea, or the desert of Covid-19. For in the wilderness, stripped of much familiar clobber, we should be more acutely aware of the need for change and the hope of

God's just rule. And just as John's words were addressed to all comers, so on the feast day of his birth we might hear his call to repentance and the promise of new life addressed now – to us personally, and to the Church, and to our whole suffering world.

'Repent...' One actual benefit of the present crisis is that there's been a real fall in air pollution and in carbon emissions. When we emerge from it, can our world sustain that reduction and so avert worse crises? Then in this country, we rightly celebrate our 'key workers' – carers, cleaners, council workers and others. Yet nearly two million of these are paid less than the Real Living Wage, while others in socially useless jobs can be paid ten times as much. Isn't that a call to repentance and just ordering?

Then can the Church too hear the call to repent and the promise of God's rule? Can she lay aside concern with her own status and wealth and constitution, and speak courageously and live authentically? When this long fast from the sacraments ends, can we renew the way of Jesus with the simple gifts of water, and bread and wine, and human companionship?

And to each one of us, in the secret of our hearts, comes the call 'Repent, for the kingdom of God is near!' In the desert of 2020, can we discover what really counts in living justly and lovingly and act upon that discovery – even at the cost of laying aside much of what we had valued?

The desert is not utterly barren, far from it. In the wilderness the water flows, and John baptises. And if we at St John's Church are summoned with the Judean crowds and with Jesus himself into the desert of deprivation, we are being brought to the water of God's Spirit, to baptism again into that fruitful new world which John and Jesus call the Kingdom of God.

So, from our midsummer desert, let us look up; let us repent, let us hope, let us rejoice. Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel, who has come to his people and set us free. Alleluia!

*Prayer for the world (using the words of the Benedictus):*

Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel, who has come to his people and set them free.

He has raised up for us a mighty Saviour, born of the house of his servant David.

*We give thanks for the birth and life of John our patron and for the coming of Jesus, whom he announced as the Lamb of God; we rejoice in the promise of God's kingdom, and we pray that our world may be filled with freedom, justice and peace.*

Lord, in your mercy,

**hear our prayer.**

Through his holy prophets God promised of old  
to save us from our enemies, from the hands of all that hate us.

*We pray for all living in fear of enemies human or viral; for victims of violence, oppression or racism; for our own communities and for all carers and other key workers on whom we depend.*

Lord, in your mercy,

**hear our prayer.**

This was the oath God swore to our father Abraham:  
to set us free to worship him without fear,  
holy and righteous in his sight all the days of our life.

*We pray for the Church throughout the world, for purity in her worship and wisdom in her mission; for our own parish of St John with St Mary; for Nicholas our Bishop, Paul our Rector, Gerry, soon to be our curate, and for all who live in our parish.*

Lord, in your mercy,

**hear our prayer.**

In the tender compassion of our God the dawn from on high shall break upon  
us,

to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death,  
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

*Trusting in the compassion of Christ crucified, we pray for all who dwell in darkness; for any we know in sickness or distress; for those who are lonely, or under the shadow of death; and may the dawn from on high shine on our brothers and sisters departed this life, especially those who over the centuries have served this parish.*

Lord, in your mercy,

**hear our prayer.**

**Our Father, who art in heaven ...**

*An act of Spiritual Communion:*

Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ, for all the benefits you have given me, for all the pains and insults you have borne for me. Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally, I ask you to come spiritually into my heart. O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother, may I know you more clearly, love you more dearly, and follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen.

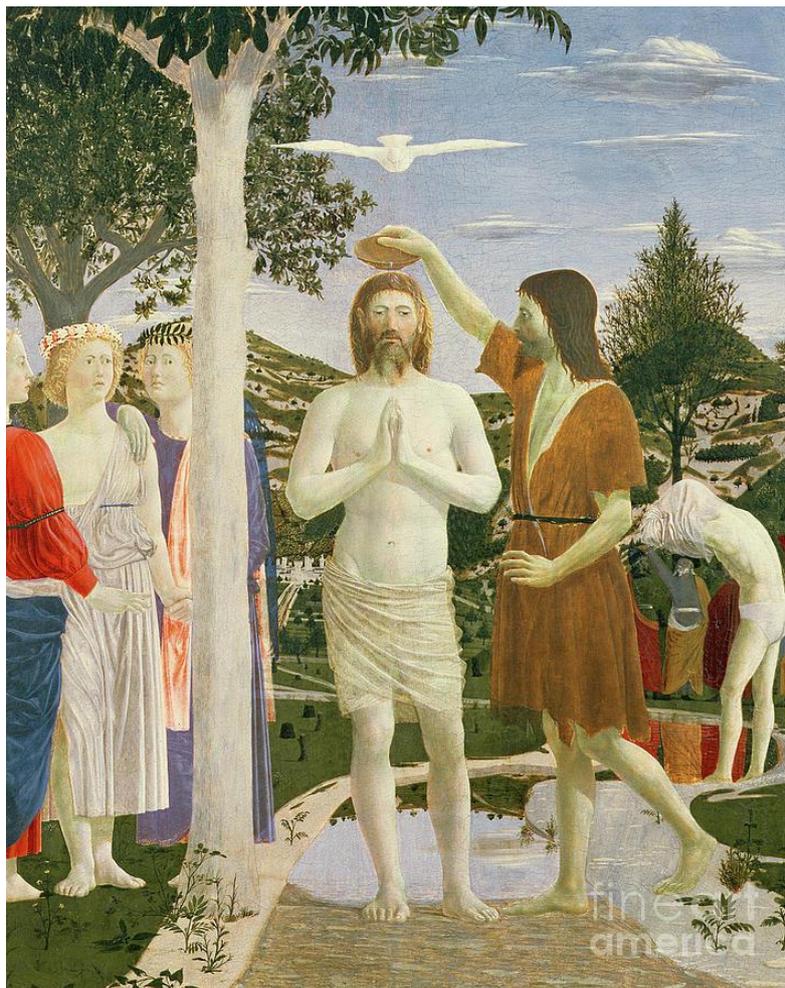
*after the Prayer of St Richard of Chichester*

*Post-Communion Prayer and Blessing:*

Merciful Lord,  
whose prophet John the Baptist proclaimed your Son as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world:  
grant that we who in Communion have known your forgiveness and your life-giving love  
may ever tell of your mercy and your peace.  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

May Christ the Sun of Righteousness shine upon us,  
scatter the darkness from before our path,  
and make us ready to meet him when he comes in glory;  
and the blessing of God Almighty,  
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,  
be with us and remain with us always. **Amen.**

Let us go in the peace of Christ.  
**Thanks be to God.**



*The Baptism of Christ, by Piero della Francesca*