

Isaiah 11.1 – 10

Romans 15.4 – 13

Matthew 3.1 – 12

Was John the Baptist actually a bit of a freak show – is that why the crowds flocked to him for the fun of seeing someone a bit off the wall and the joy of hearing him slagging off the powers that be and watching them splutter? And if he was indeed more than a bit odd, does that mean there was no authority in what he was saying?

"By their fruits ye shall know them, not by their roots," is not a biblical quote, though it sounds as though it ought to be. It's in fact an aside from a lecture by a late nineteenth century religious philosopher William James, brother of Henry. He was a bit odd too, but I'm sure he would have found common cause with the Baptist, not just because of their shared oddness, but because of the similarity of what they were trying to say.

And that was that there is a clear difference between the nature of a religious experience and the value of religious truth. To put it bluntly, you may have doubts about what made someone think the way they do, but that of itself doesn't make them wrong. John was an easy target for urbane well-educated Pharisees, and they would no doubt have used all the sleazy debating devices in the book to poo-poo him. You can almost hear them, can't you? Speaking as a religious expert who has spent thirty years studying the law and the prophets and coming from a long line of distinguished waffle waffle waffle... You on the other hand hang about in the desert claiming to have insights from goodness knows where, probably some funny fungus you chanced upon and you expect us to take you seriously? And to be fair, they may have had a point but that doesn't prove he's wrong. Indeed the gospel writer clearly wants us to take on board that folk may have flocked to hear him not so much for the entertainment value but because they thought he was right.

John, from whatever his experience in the wilderness may have been could see that the mainstream religion just wasn't delivering for the mass of people and he pulled no punches in saying so. What validated him was not the experience that gave rise to his utterings, but the truth and resonance of what he said.

At risk of labouring the point, you could speak similarly about the apostle Paul – we really don't know what his experience was on the road to Damascus and even if we did know all the medical details and could explain it all away as epilepsy or whatever, that would not mean there is no value in the theology he expounded after that event. We discern that value in the profound effect that his thought had on the early development of Christianity.

But to return to this entertaining little spat between John and the Pharisees, it does present us with something to think about. Not least because this challenge to repent comes round each year regular as clockwork and I at least always think, crikey, has anything changed since the last time? But also because it's not that clear where we stand ourselves. We're hardly out in the wilderness with John but we're not exactly the powers that be, are we? Unless I'm missing something... we're a pleasant little parish out in the shires, doing our bit of course but is it enough? Is another bout of repentance really required?

I was driving along listening to the radio in the car the other day and I'm sure I heard a government minister say "the status quo is never acceptable." Which set me thinking why not, but it is the way of the world now isn't it? We want a culture of continuous improvement, every time I have my annual review I have to think up targets for next year. Actually I've reached the stage where I tend to say I've solved all the problems you've sent me within the timescale you set so what more do you want? But maybe I'm just lucky to have that sort of job. As a church both individually and corporately there's always more we can do but perhaps what we could do with this annual call to repent is to take the time to take stock. Of the things we do right as well as things we may have left undone.

For example here, after a recent Baptism, several of the visitors told me how special they had found the service. I feel free to say that because I hadn't had much to do with it but clearly it had struck just the right note and I found that very cheering. And no doubt similar things will happen many times over during the Christmas season to come. So our entries in the Book of Life won't all be on the debit side. And perhaps some aspects of our status quo are acceptable and should be nurtured and acknowledged as thoroughly worthwhile.

I do love this book of life idea, by the way. I remember listening to a real old-time evangelical preacher down in Brighton donkeys' years ago as he explained exactly how the book of life would operate on the day of judgement. Great stuff it was. I'll explain it to you one day. And just recently I've begun to wonder whether we're nearly there what with all these wikileaks of pretty well every conversation that has ever happened, but even more so with the continuing ubiquity of facebook. The thing with facebook seems to be that what you write is potentially out there for ever – you simply can't get it back and furthermore you really don't know who's listening.

Some of you may already have guessed where I'm going with this and be worried that I'm treading into dangerous territory. It's this Bishop of Willesden thing and if I'm not careful I could shortly be asked to withdraw from public ministry. But what the heck, I've always had a soft spot for Willesden – several of my family lived there when I was younger, and I do quite like its seedy north London buzz and I'm now more than a little inclined to sympathise with its Bishop. If you haven't picked up on this story he's something of a left wing evangelical and he was having a conversation on facebook where his republican sympathies became clear in the context of comments about the pending royal wedding and all this was somehow picked up by the Daily Mail. And you'd have to say, some of his comments weren't too carefully considered – but that's often the way with electronic communication of course. Anyway, it was lively stuff and clearly ruffled a few feathers though it was hardly seditious, but the upshot was that he was asked by his line manager Bishop to withdraw from public ministry for a period so far unspecified. If you want to learn more, both the Telegraph and the Guardian have thorough explanations on their websites of both the original story and the campaign to get him reinstated.

The reason I mention this is partly because it's such a dream story for the papers. (And to warn you to be careful what you put on facebook.) And also as a bit of a dare – it bothers me that I am often more nervous standing here speaking about current affairs than I am about John and the Pharisees. And this is the church we belong to so I'm going to say it – I'm really disappointed that the church can't stand by its man in these circumstances. No doubt you'll tell me if you disagree and I'll be interested to hear about it. And I suppose

you could say it's got people talking about things churchy. It certainly got more column inches than a survey by a group developed by some 40 churches calling themselves the Cinammon Society who have calculated that the contribution to society made by church giving and volunteering amounts to something in the region of £1.5 - £2 billion.

And that's to say nothing of the well-being that church communities add to people's lives at key times in their lives. It's all the kind of news that doesn't make the news. This is what churches do and do well and should not be underestimated. As we come to this annual call to repentance yet again let's not get too despondent – there are aspects of the status quo which are perfectly acceptable whatever government ministers may say, the fact that people may think we're a bit odd doesn't mean we're wrong – they thought the same about John the Baptist and maybe the thought that we are doing some things right will encourage us to continued improvement in this new church year.