

Sunday 11 July 2021 - Trinity 6

Collect

Merciful God, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as pass our understanding: pour into our hearts such love toward you that we, loving you in all things and above all things, may obtain your promises, which exceed all that we can desire; 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.

(or)

Creator God, you made us all in your image: may we discern you in all that we see, and serve you in all that we do; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Post Communion

God of our pilgrimage, you have led us to the living water: refresh and sustain us as we go forward on our journey, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Ephesians 1:3-14

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴ just as he chose us in Christ ^[b] before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. ⁵ He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸ that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight ⁹ he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. ¹¹ In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, ^[c] having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, ¹² so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. ¹³ In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; ¹⁴ this ^[d] is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

Mark 6:14-29

¹⁴ King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' ^[c] name had become known. Some were ^[d] saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him." ¹⁵ But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." ¹⁶ But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

¹⁷ For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod ^[e] had married her. ¹⁸ For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." ¹⁹ And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, ²⁰ for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; ^[f] and yet he liked to listen to him. ²¹ But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. ²² When his daughter Herodias ^[g] came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it." ²³ And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." ²⁴ She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer."

²⁵ Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." ²⁶ The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. ²⁷ Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's ^[h] head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, ²⁸ brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. ²⁹ When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

Sermon - Revd David Treharne. Distinctive and Engaged

Just between you me and the 4 walls of the Internet, I really dislike the Gospel passage from today. Every time I read it, I get quite upset as I hear of the death of John the Baptist, and the manner of his death. Yet, this uncomfortable disturbing passage offers some important teaching.

Whilst one can highlight plenty of reasons why one should embark on following God's path, it is also at times a narrow and treacherous path. It's a hard road to walk and it does come with a health warning.

Promoting and preaching the reign of God will bring life, peace, hope and joy to people, but as John the Baptist's story shows this can also be a very costly and tough thing to do, particular if following God's way involves challenging those in power and with power. Sadly some people will be antagonistic and hostile towards God's reign.

Last week I had the joy of officiating at my first baptism since Feb 2020. It was so moving to see little Tommy not only outwardly baptised with water, but plunged into the love and life of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. To see parents and godparents stand up and pledge their allegiance to Christ Jesus and promise to raise this child in the Christian faith; and to hear their desire for Tommy to thrive in all aspects of his life and live life in all its fullness was really encouraging.

But that baptism service for all its smiles and beauty also had that health warning.

"Do not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified. Fight valiantly as a disciple of Christ against sin, the world and the devil, and remain faithful to Christ to the end of your life."

In other words, the path you are choosing, the path of following Jesus Christ and walking according to his ways is amazing, but it will require courage and backbone. It won't be easy. Yes, it is the way of life and hope, joy and peace, healing and wholeness and blessing, but it is also a way that can, and probably will bring conflict. It will involve battles inside one's own self, one's identity and purpose; but also battles against all those powers, principalities and rulers that set themselves up in opposition to the truth, justice, love, life and light of God.

How will you and I respond when evil, injustice and unrighteousness come before us... when the unholy and the antithesis of God's way comes asking for your or my approval?

John spoke out at what was not right and holy and he was imprisoned for it, and ultimately lost his life for it.

History is littered with examples of those like John who have stood up for the Kingdom of God, but have faced huge resistance and hostility for it, and paid the price for it.

In the wonderful film *Evan Almighty*, Congressman Evan Baxter is called upon to oppose something unholy, by standing up to much more senior and powerful colleagues. His stance is unpopular and costly potentially leading to him being unemployed!

I wonder whether I/we have the courage to stand up for what is good, holy, just, right and true? To speak out even when it's unpopular to do so?

For me, I worry whether there is more of a danger of ending up as a Herod character.

Verse 20, "Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed;[f] and yet he liked to listen to him."

Verse 26 "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." 26 The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her.

Despite fearing John the Baptist, despite liking what John said, despite being grieved at being asked to have him beheaded... Herod was more concerned about popularity and reputation than the things of God. What might others think of me? How might this come across? Which on one level isn't a bad thing, but if that puts us at odds with the Kingdom we are on dangerous ground.

For any disciple of Jesus, it is hard to stand up and speak out if one's voice is unpopular, for popularity seems to be too easily linked to something being right. I will always remember Pope Benedict on his visit to the UK back in 2010 speaking to our politicians... 'Just because something is popular doesn't make it right or good!'

Distinctive but also engaged...

John the Baptist managed to have a right balance between being distinctive in his life for God, but he was also engaged with the world. We too are called to be both distinctive and engaged.

Distinctive... to live God's way, display something tangible of the life of God in our daily lives. The fruits of the Spirit... love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5). Promoters of the values of the Kingdom of God... justice, truth, righteousness and holiness. (Be Holy as I am holy. 1 Peter 1:15-16)

Having the same attitude as Christ Jesus (Philippians 2:5-11)

Being salt and light (Matthew 5:13-16)

St Cyril of Jerusalem says we are to become "little Christ's." We are 'Christians' because we are literally 'anointed ones'. We are not only to be followers of Christ but 'Christ like'.

Yet this distinctiveness is not to be hidden away, but lived out, displayed and shared day to day.

As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you." (John 20:21)

Go into all the world (Matt 28:19)... your homes, shops, schools, colleges, streets and networks and be distinctive "little Christ's" to the world.

Be **engaged** in society, in touch, relevant and in relationship with the world. Be with and alongside others, connected to communities. It's amazing what happens when this happens. Charities start and lives are transformed... justice rolls like a river and the world becomes a better place!

Three 3's

We are to be **present, participate** fully in life and be in **partnership** with others where we can whilst remaining distinctive in our faith and life in Christ Jesus.

St Paul described the lifestyles of those who have Christ in them to be like a sweet fragrance (2 Cor 2:15) that others can smell and appreciate, or a living letter (2 Cor 3:2) that communicates Christ's presence to others. There is distinctiveness about the Christian, but the life is also engaged in a way that seen, felt and heard to be attractive and compelling.

This is a real challenge for us to be distinctive and engaged.

We are called to be incarnational, embodying God... Christ in us by his Spirit... filled with the life come down from heaven, but also fully earthed and engaged in the spaces and places we inhabit.

To be in the world, but not of it! Unfortunately, it's only too easy to become a people of the world but not in it, where our Christian distinctiveness becomes wishy washy watery nothingness in the pursuit of relevance or popularity.

Now there's a challenge I hope we are prepared to rise to in our mission and ministry to children, young people, families, the housebound and those suffering, and wherever we are scattered during the week!

The other week I was told about the term 'Moralistic therapeutic deism.' It's a belief system that says:

1. A God exists.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.

It's quite appealing as it doesn't make any real demands on us. There's no personal relationship with Jesus Christ and no real need for repentance or prayer. God exists but he's not really involved, so the incarnation and redemption don't really come into it.

The life of John the Baptist was alluring and compelling and connected people to God. May our lives be distinctive and engaged and connect people to God. As we live out and proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ, sadly there will be some who will not want their lives and their kingdoms touched by the Lordship of Christ. However, for others it will always bring hope, new life and transformation.