

John The Baptist Remains a Role Model For Us 12-Jan-25

Baptism is an important symbol and ritual within Christian communities. In the Uniting Church Basis of Union, we say that we experience God's love and grace in this act.

We say that in this act we are joined to Christ and to each other.

We say publicly that we commit to living according to God's Spirit, seeking truth, justice, compassion, and love in the world.

We say we will remember that we are baptised and that the Holy Spirit sets our hearts on fire with love for Christ, and an increased gift of grace: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and wonder in God's presence, the spirit of joy and to delight in serving God's only Son,

Let us remember our baptism and give thanks to God, who meets us in water and in community. Let us remember that we are faithful servants of Christ.

Luke tells us a little bit about John the Baptist who in a public act baptised Jesus by water in the presence of God with the heavenly Dove. From what the people had heard about John already they had an increased sense of expectation of him and the kind of relationship he had with Jesus.

When we're conversing with others about our own expectations of someone, we usually include some of the characteristics of what it would take to be inspired by such a person which raises our aspiration about ourselves. So, I doubt it would be different when we talk about our thoughts on John the Baptist. To use a modern expression John is an influencer – albeit not a wealthy one, but a very humble and simple influencer.

Luke's portrayal of John is rich with spiritual significance and distinct characteristics that bring into the light his role as a forerunner to Jesus Christ, beginning with the timing of John's conception to his elderly mother Elizabeth, prior to Mary conceiving Jesus. To get to know him a little better we backtrack to v5 to capture more of John's personality, mission, and impact in a way that has touched the hearts and minds of generation after generation. John leaves us with wisdom and knowledge of Jesus and how He changed world views and actions on many fronts forever is unsurpassed.

To begin with John is depicted as a figure of prophethood who engaged in sharing with everyone whom he met that a moral urgency existed. John's role as a predecessor was to call people to repent, to change/transform their ways if you will, always emphasising the need for inner transformation – change the inner self and then experience the wonderfully noticeable change of the whole self. It's a bit like when you answer the phone the person on the other end can hear your smile, or perhaps abruptness. The visible change is there for all to witness God's love for you at work. John's emphasis was on his contemporaries because he knew that the Messiah was on His way.

The inspiring images of the valleys being filled and mountains being made low signifies his commitment to leveling the spiritual landscape, where everyone is equal and as such the Holy Place is open wide for all people to enter. This characteristic reflects his deep understanding of the need for humility and for people to authentically change their ways and create in themselves a new and clean heart – giving themselves a fresh start. Jesus knows who you were, and who you are now – with him, in him, forgiven and dearly loved by him. John is clearly placing a great importance on the righteousness of God which is received by everyone without the need of arrogance but full of humility.

When I think of John's apparel and the lifestyle he led I can understand why at first people may scoff at him. However, those very things added to his uniqueness. In the scriptures he's described as wearing clothing made from camel hair which is actually quite soft and durable – feels like felt, it's warm and waterproof, in that era it was used to make tents and carpets. It's worn today by royalty and the wealthy. As I say he had a unique look about him because he didn't wear the linen robes like other people of his time.

His diet was one of locust and wild honey, he spent his time out of towns and villages, so his hair was more than likely a bit wild. These things only added to his unquestionable uniqueness as he embodied a radical departure from social acceptance and expectations. A forerunner to Jesus in many ways. His simple life and lifestyle models for us what's really important – his unwavering commitment to simplicity and his focus on his spirituality mattered more than any worldly comfort could provide.

By living in the wilderness, John sets himself apart from the religious hierarchy of his era, showing the people there is an alternative, he was an authentic example of faith that the everyday village occupant could connect with – he sat amongst them, preaching to them, telling them that someone even greater than him was coming. His clothing and diet reflect a prophetic identity, echoing the prophets of the Old Testament – the Jewish people who were listening understood the stories of the old prophets which only reinforced his credibility and appeal to those who stopped to listen to him. He challenged their traditional ways in a way they could grasp. As we know thousands turned to him thinking he was the Messiah, so he needed to teach them he wasn't the one who was yet to come. You don't get that response if you make the message all about yourself.

John wasn't the shy retiring type of character, he was bold and quite willing to challenge other people's expectations and their religious reality, which he didn't actually agree with. John spoke about a truth to power where he directly addresses the corrupt behaviour of the Pharisees and Sadducees, rebuking them for being hypocrites. He was fearless in proclaiming the source of his integrity and commitment came from God's message, establishing him as a righteous and courageous leader who was willing to take a stand for what he believed.

John's teachings aren't just about individual transformations; they are all encompassing from social justice, responsible care of the environment, to living in an ethical way. John's

teachings include how to live with a spirit of authentic integrity, love, gratitude and grace which isn't bound up in wealth or status. This emphasis on practical implications of faith and the intrinsic connection between faith and ethics is a potent characteristic that defines John's ministry.

Through the act of baptism, John symbolises the washing away of sins and the newness of life that comes from true transformation from what was, to who is. His call to baptism signifies an outward sign of inward change, encouraging a faith that results in tangible actions. This sacramental practice lays the groundwork for understanding the sacrament of baptism in our faithfulness to Christ.

Finally, John displays the characteristic of humility regarding his role in relation to Jesus. He acknowledges that he isn't the Messiah – the One they are all waiting and hope for. His purpose is to prepare the way for someone greater. His declaration, 'I baptise you with water, but He who is mightier than I is coming...' illustrates a self-awareness that puts Christ's mission ahead of his call to prepare the people for the arrival of their Messiah. John understands the divine order and his own place as a servant of Christ right up to the time of his death by beheading in a prison cell for a superficial king.

John the Baptist exemplifies characteristics of a passionate prophet, a simple and unwavering form of discipline, a man of great courage in the face of much opposition, a commitment to living ethically and his place as a faithful servant of Christ Jesus who would be his Saviour. His life and ministry serve as an exemplary model of what it means to live in anticipation of God's redemptive work through Christ.

Amen