

John came at a particular time and in a particular place to proclaim the Gospel. The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. Repent and be baptised. What is the Kingdom of God? God's Kingdom is justice, mercy and peace. God's Kingdom is love. Repent and be baptised.

John was commissioned by God. He spoke in the tradition of God's revelation of Himself to humanity in the Scriptures and in so many other ways.

John warned the complacent that they would not escape the judgment. Being a member of a particular race or social class, being a conventional or nominal religious believer, having a certain status, none of those things will save you. Repent and be baptised. Only God can save any of us.

He listens to the people's questions and answers them in accordance with God's commandments. Citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven are people who are humble and compassionate. Above all, they are people who are filled to overflowing with the love of God – especially with love for the poor and the outcast.

John pointed people not to himself, but to Jesus. The coming of Jesus, John promised, was imminent. Jesus would judge the world. He would pour out His life-giving Holy Spirit on the world.

John died a martyr's death because he dared to speak truth to power.

John baptised Jesus. The Holy Spirit came upon Jesus. God powerfully proclaimed that Jesus is His Son. Jesus is God's Word to us, God's message. Jesus is born in the world. Jesus is born in our hearts. We in Christ and He in us, we are the children of God and filled with His Holy Spirit. We are what we are not through any desert or effort of our own, but simply by the grace of God.

What John says to the crowds on the banks of the River Jordan, he says to every generation. The Good News is for us and for our children.

The best known verse in the Bible is probably John 3¹⁶: *So God loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.* It doesn't say *So God loved the Church.* I'm sure God does love the Church (despite everything), but His love for the Church is not the reason that He gave His only-begotten Son. God did that because He so loved the world.

I've been reading some of the writings of the Very Reverend Martyn Percy, Dean of Christ Church Oxford, in particular his latest book *The Humble Church – Renewing the Body of Christ.* There are many points on which I would find it hard to go along with all that Professor Percy says. However, he makes some profound observations in his book and elsewhere and many of them are very much in line with today's Gospel.

The mission of the Church is to proclaim God's Kingdom to the world. When we worry excessively about our own declining numbers, the Church's diminishing status in the world, buildings, maintenance and money, we are missing the point. Collecting statistics, devising strategies, producing plans to halt and, if possible, to reverse decline are missing the point. They are so far missing the point that they are bound to fail. What is required of us is quite simple – that we remain faithful. The calling of the Church, of all Christian people, is to worship God in spirit and in truth, to serve God and to serve God's world. The overriding principle is love. On statistics, Percy quotes Albert Einstein. *Not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted counts.* If we are faithful in worship and humble service to God and to the world, the Church may grow in number or she may not. That is down to God. If, on the other hand, we focus on what the Church needs rather than on what the world needs, on what God demands of us, our Church will surely die. The Church herself cannot die because she is sustained by the grace of God, not by us at all.

Hebrews 1¹: *God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets,* ² *Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son.* We are in this tradition. God has spoken to us as He spoke to our forefathers. Our calling is to speak His Word, to live His word, to the world today. We in Christ and He in us, just as Christ shows the world Who God is, our calling is to reveal to the world Who Jesus is. We can only do this through the power of His Holy Spirit, Who is God's free gift to us in Christ.

God is the Judge Who demands that we love Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and our neighbours as ourselves. He is not satisfied with a complacent respectability on the part of those who claim to be His people. Percy writes, *It is well worth remembering that you will never, ever, in all your life, meet someone that God does not love – fully, wholly and abundantly – madly and excessively, in fact. Equally, you will never meet anyone who deserves all of this love, or who merits more or less than God's own love for you.*

The Church needs to be more humble. The Church needs to listen more. It is often as if we Christians said to the world, *We have the answer. Now what is your question?* We all need to listen more attentively to other people in order to find out what their questions really are. We also need to be humble enough to consider that God might be speaking to us through other people. God isn't limited to revealing Himself to Christians and to the Church. He speaks to us through the world and He use the people of the world to communicate His Truth. There is no limit to the ways in which God acts.

John pointed enquirers away from Himself towards Jesus. Our mission is not to recruit a few more members to keep the Church going for a few more years. Our mission is to draw people to God in Christ, for their sake and for God's sake, not for the Church's sake. Jesus is God in the world. The Church's calling is to be Jesus in the world.

And this is costly. John died a martyr's death. The Christian calling is to take up our cross daily and to follow Jesus.

Repent and be baptised. We are the children of God. We have the Holy Spirit. We are also a work in progress, but it's God's work and our end is in His Hands, in His Hand's alone.