

SERMON FOR BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST | 24.06.18

Two questions: what are your earliest memories? And - who were the people who most influenced you when you were little? Perhaps we ought to have five minutes of silence now – and it would certainly be really interesting to hear your stories!? Failing that I want to start off with one of mine.

For the first nine years of my life I lived in a small village south of Cambridge. In those days it was a very separate community from the town and children like me could roam around pretty safely without much adult intervention.

Or they would have been able too if it were not for Peter Pesci. Peter Pesci lived next door to Freestones bakery and was a member of the biggest family in the village, one of nine children. And he was tough. So one of my earliest memories was being chased by Peter Pesci all the way down Wollards Lane, past Robinsons dairy and Mrs Mott's sweet shop, sharp right past Blennie Powell's garage and the Baptist Church until I was completely worn out and I had to face him, head on, outside the Square and Compasses pub. He wanted a fight and I, puffing and panting – and scared to death - came out with the first thing I could think of. *If you hit me, I said, I won't hit you back.*

Where that idea came from, I have no idea. But it seemed to work and I remember him sloping off back to his enormous house by the crossroads. I don't think I was more than six or seven.

It was St Ignatius who coined the famous phrase *Give me a child until they are seven and I will show you the man* – although the Bible's Book of Proverbs gives us *Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it* which says something very similar. And as we all know, those 'Early Years' as we have now learnt to call them, are absolutely fundamental to the people we will become.

But those of us who are lucky enough to become parents, or teachers, or people with influence, often have no idea of the impact we are making: which phrase, which action, which ethical choice – hurriedly made in the course of a busy day - will be the one that forms a young person for life?

The story which is featured in today's Gospel, the birth of John the Baptist, is written in such a homely style that we can easily identify with each of the twists and turns – the old priest silenced for doubting what the angel had told him about the son to be born to him - and his primigravida wife Elizabeth who nobody believed because she was a woman!

Now we don't know how old John's parents were at the time but today late births are increasingly common: statistics show that the highest growth in maternity rates are among women over 35. No surprise then that Jane Seymore had twins at 44 and both Cherie Blair and Susan Sarandon had boys at 45.

But to return to our story, the way the Bible account story is told is to train us to make the link between John the Baptist and the prophet Isaiah, 800 years before, who is the subject of today's 1st reading: *who are you to say that you are only young and you don't know what you are talking about: you shall speak whatever I command you....*

In other words, the thrust of today's readings are asking us to think seriously about what we say – and to consider the origins of what we talk about. And the strong message is that we need to be careful of what we say because we don't know just how it will be used by other people – and even more importantly, how it will influence younger minds.

Which is, perhaps, the reason why there is so much concern by commentators about Twitter and the art of tweeting. Is it sensible to be making up international policy in under 140 characters? Are 'off the cuff' remarks – or words said in the heat of the moment – best kept for the dinner table or the pub rather than our TV screens? Should those with a great deal of influence be pouring out opinions 'just because technology makes it possible'? Is the quality of our national life enhanced by all these loose words?

Actually this isn't a new problem. The wise Jewish leader Gamaliel - who went to see Jesus by night before his trial - talked in his own day about a charismatic man by the name of Theudas. He was a formidable political orator and he gathered a great crowd around him because he was so articulate. Theudas wanted people to trust him completely and to believe that he had all the answers.

Eventually, however, people discovered that were being manipulated. Theudas was about power (his power) and not about truth at all. Thank goodness he was finally rumbled but not before a lot of people had got hurt. For Theudas read any dictator or ambitious politician.

And sadly, some religious preachers too. Which might explain why many intelligent people dip their toes into Church life – and quickly take them out again. In some, they will find themselves being led into a kind of biblical fundamentalism that seems to have slick answers to every problem – but which lacks all humanity or the ability to balance the competing demands of life today. Or, alternatively, there are the liberal churches which seem so involved in the problems of the world and in getting us into supporting one good cause after another, that we lose sight of heaven altogether. *As Psalm 121 says, unless the Lord builds the house, those who struggle to build it will labour in vain.*

What the story of John the Baptist says to me is the opposite of the manipulative tweet or the impassioned sermon. It is about a spirituality that allows the still small voice of God to help each of us to flourish – in our own way, at our own speed and in our own place – the ‘change of heart’ that makes us his children.

From his birth to his rather ignominious death in the dungeons underneath Herod’s palace, John was pointing away from himself and drawing people to listen to Jesus because only he could show us what the Truth looked like in the here and now. So WWJS: what does Jesus want to say, through us, in 2018?

Back in 1st century Palestine the people were taught that Zachariah and Elizabeth were not too old to have a child. 800 years before that, Isaiah was reminded that God had a plan for everyone and that if they stayed close to God’s Truth *you will be called to raise up and pull down, to build and to plant. And it will not be your words that matter, it will be mine.*

John the Baptist, the one who took seriously the words spoken to Isaiah: *don’t say you are too young. You shall speak whatever I command you.* And the same is true today: God is inviting us to speak his words - especially to the likes of people like Peter Pesci.