

The Eternal Word
Studies in the Gospel of John
John the Baptist - a most unusual witness!
John 1:19-34
Preacher: Pastor Roy Summers

Vishal Mangalwadi is an Indian Christian who has spent a lot of time in his home country and the West. Over the years, he began to notice big differences between Indian culture and western culture. He began to ask, Why the differences? And wrote “The Book that made your World” as a result.

One of the differences he found was who his country regarded as a hero and who the west regarded as a hero. In his country heroes were people with power. So, for example, Hindu gods are all often depicted with weapons in their hands. But in the West he discovered that heroes were not defined by power but by service. Which explains why an old weak powerless man like Captain Tom was called a hero by the newspapers — because he served the country by walking many lengths in his garden to raise millions of pounds for the NHS during the pandemic. This serving view of heroism, Vishal realised came from, example of Jesus:

“Jesus’ heroism replaced brutality with love, pride with meekness, and domination over others with self-sacrificing service. Jesus exemplified this when he took a bowl of water and a servant’s towel and washed his disciples feet.” (page 134)

John the Baptist, the human character before us this morning was a servant-hero. He was not like Alexander the Great or Augustus Ceaser (who consolidated his power by killing 300 senators and 200 knights). John was a true hero who like his Master came to serve and in the end was beheaded for speaking the truth. Jesus changes everything about a culture, including who we look up to as our heroes.

The Story

John the Baptist is one of the greatest figures in the Bible, *“Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist..”* (Matthew 11:11). He was the last Old Testament prophet and his task was to prepare the Jewish nation for the arrival of the Messiah. Before a King visits a city, council leaders sweep the streets, paint the railings, and so on . That was John the Baptist’s

task - to prepare the way, to roll out the red carpet, prepare the way, to announce the arrival of the Christ. Crowds came *“from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins they were baptised by him in the river Jordan.”* (Matthew 3:5) One day Jesus joined the queue to be baptised. John was not having that *“I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?”* (Matt 3:14) but Jesus insisted, *“At that moment heaven was opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said “This is my Son, whom I love, with him I am well pleased.”* (3:16-17)

After his baptism Jesus was led into the desert to be tempted by Satan for 40 days. As far as we can tell, the events of John chapter 1 happen right at the end of that Victorious Test in the desert. When Jesus appears in verse 29, *“The next day John saw Jesus coming towards him,”* it seems to be right after the temptation.

Well, the great popularity of John niggled the religious leaders in Jerusalem so they sent a delegation to check out this strange fellow who had never been to their Bible Colleges and did not hold any of their titles—he wasn’t a priest, a Levite, a Pharisee, or a Sadducee, or whatnot. Who on earth does this fellow think, is?

Question 1: Are you the Christ, the Messiah, the great King the Jewish nation was expecting, who they hoped would defeat the Romans, put Jerusalem on the map.

“I am not the Christ”

Question 2 “Are you Elijah?” There is a famous verse in the last chapter of the last book of the OT which predicts that a figure like Elijah would come (Malachi 4:5,6)

“No, I’m not Elijah!”

We are probably to imagine this questioning as hostile and threatening.

Question 3: “Are you the Prophet?” Moses had predicted way back in Deuteronomy 18:15, “The Lord will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers.”

“Nope!”

They've run out of options: if John is none of these well knowns, well who is he, because they've got to go back and tell their bosses in Jerusalem. "*I am the voice of one calling in the desert. Make straight the way for the Lord.*" (Isaiah 40:3). In other words, John was saying: "I'm just a voice calling out in the wilderness, not even a voice calling from capital Jerusalem, 'get ready for Israel's King.' The King's the important one, not me!" A bit of a let-down for the investigators, right? John says he's not important!

The Pharisees who had come along for the ride, ask, "*Why then do you baptise if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah nor the Prophet?*" The Christ would have authority to baptise, so too Elijah and so too the Prophet, but if John was none of these three why is he baptising people?

I sense a weariness in John the Baptist, who wants the focus to be on Jesus, "*I baptise with water, but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the shoelaces of his sandals I am not worthy to untie.*"

"You want to know who *I am*, because crowds are following me but I want to step out of the spotlight and talk about the One who is so much greater than I that I don't even feel worthy of untying his shoelaces!"

The next day, and I think this delegation from Jerusalem is still around, Jesus came by in person. Now John has the opportunity to introduce Jesus fully, "*Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. This is the one I meant when I said 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me [which means Jesus is greater than I because He is eternal]. I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptising with water was that he might be revealed to Israel [in other words, I'm baptising with water, not to draw attention to myself, but to introduce these crowds to Jesus]. Then John gave this testimony: I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him except that the one who sent me to baptise with water, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptise with the Holy Spirit. I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.'*"

What are you and I to take away from this story about John the Baptist?

#1. A word about personality

The first point I want to draw out is a word about personality. John the Baptist was a unique personality. He wore unconventional clothes made out of camel's hair, with had a leather belt around his waist. He ate unconventional Bear Grylls outdoor food, locusts and wild honey. He lived in the wild. He was Spirit-taught not trained in the Bible colleges of the Rabbis. He was passionate and fearless: when some of the religious leaders came to him to be baptised he said to them, *"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come Produce fruit in keeping with repentance!"* (Matt 3:7)

He had an eccentric, edgy, radical, maverick, personality—perfectly suited for the tough task he was given preparing the nation of Israel for the Day of the Lord.

So let's talk for a few minutes about personality. There is Personality and there is Character.

Character is what should be found in every follower of Jesus Christ—truthfulness, godliness uprightness, reliability, faithfulness, kindness and so on.

Personality, on the other hand, are the traits of the person in whom sits that character. You can have very different personalities, all with the same character.

John the Baptist and the John the apostle who writes the book of John, lie near the opposite ends of the personality spectrum. John the Baptist is passionate, outspoken, rough, edgy, John the apostle is the complete gentlemen, cool, dispassionate.

The reason I mention personality is two-fold:

The Lord calls all kinds of personalities to himself. And the church reflect that spectrum! If you are like John the apostle, you're welcome into God's kingdom, if you're a more fiery passionate John the Baptist, you're welcome too! Let's make sure here at MPC all personalities are welcomed and none shunned!

The other reason I mention this point is about leadership types in the church today. God calls John the Baptists *and* John the Apostles into ministry! In the Bible God called edgy personalities into the ministry, such as Elijah and other prophets in the OT, such as John the Baptist and the Apostle Peter in the NT. Outside the Bible God called

Martin Luther and the faithful band of Anabaptists leaders such as Felix Manz and Conrad Grebels in the 1500s, John Wesley in the 1700s, Charles Spurgeon in the 1800s and AW Tozer in the 1900s.

But today, and here is my concern, when you survey the Bible-believing evangelical scene that we belong to here at MPC, there is not a John Baptist in sight! I could not think of a single John the Baptist in the evangelical circles we move in! They're all vanilla! Nothing wrong with vanilla! Perhaps an odd strawberry or raspberry around but certainly not a lime or a lemon! There's something wrong in the leadership of our evangelical world!

It seems to me as if in the light of the scandals of recent years (where big shot preachers have fallen, not ordinary pastors, just the Big Shots) the evangelical church has confused personality and character and opted to screen out not only dodgy characters (which is right) but also screen out unconventional personalities which is wrong.

The church desperately needs John the Baptists, Peter's, Elijah's, Luthers and Tozers! We need radicals in the leadership of the church! The Lord has important things to say to the church through them! Things no-one else, is prepared to say!

#2. A Lesson in Humility

But in the second place, we learn from JB a lesson in humility. "I'm just a voice", "I'm not here to make a following, just to point people to Jesus." John the Baptist was humble, though crowds followed him. Whenever I prepare to preach these days I try to consult two commentaries, one written by South-East Asian teachers and one written by African preachers. Samuel Ngewa, a Kenyan teacher writing on this passage, "*The general idea in Africa is that when one holds an office, especially a political office, one should grab as much as one can, since the opportunity may never come again.*" English and American politicians are just the same, so often, in it for their own gain.

John the Baptist does the opposite, although he is a very great prophet he's not in it for himself, he shies away from the limelight, he's only a voice. John 3:30, "Jesus must become greater; I must become less."

What a beautiful example of sweet humility! It stands in contrast to the boasting that pervades the church today, right? Leaders boast about the size of their congregations, their academic qualifications, the books they have written, the conferences they have spoken at. When Paul was goaded to boast he wrote, 2 Corinthians 11: *“I have been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food...”*

It is widely accepted that William Carey was the father of modern missions. He was a humble man. *“I am this day 70 years old, a monument of divine mercy and goodness, though on a review of my life I find much, very much, for which I ought to be humbled in the dust; my sins are innumerable, my negligence in the Lords work has been great, I have not promoted his cause, nor sought his glory and honour as I ought.”* (page 155)

May the Lord teach us all sweet humility. *“Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”* (1 Corinthians 1:31)

Finally,

#3 A call to witness, a call to be light

John the Baptist was always pointing to Jesus Christ. *“John came as a witness to testify to the light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light. He came only as witness to the light”* (1:6). Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus is the one who has surpassed me because he came before me. Jesus is the Son of God.

And that’s the task of every follower of Jesus Christ, not to point to ourselves, but to point to Jesus. You say “but pastor I’m not an evangelist, I can’t talk about Jesus to everyone I meet, I’m too shy, I’ve not got it in me.” What did Jesus teach? *“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a candle and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on a stand and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men that they may see your*

good works and praise (not you but) your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5) You can be a Jesus witness by the good deeds you do for others! Freely, without wanting anything in return! Neighbours, school friends, unbelieving family members, colleagues. Work these good deeds out for yourselves.

Since the pandemic the volunteering sector has collapsed? In an article in the Guardian NP early May, *“Volunteering is at a historic low in England... people who were lifelong volunteers broke their habit during the pandemic...”* Another article from the USA, said that many churches have given up doing their Holiday Bible Clubs because there were not enough helpers willing to give up their time! (I read these articles with thanksgiving to God, we have willing hands for our HBC this summer—just a few spaces left, can you help?)

John the Baptist was a witness, a light. How can you and I be a witness, a light? By doing good works which beg the question, “Why?” and point away from ourselves to the glory of our Father in heaven.

May the Lord draw to himself, men, women, boys and girls of all personalities, may he teach us all to be humble, and may he empower us to be witnesses to his grace and salvation, so that all might believe in Him.