

150th St John the Baptist, Eltham

Since his death, John the Baptist has got around a bit. His head is on display in San Silvestro in Rome, and his other head is in St John's church in Damascus. Amiens Cathedral also has one of his heads and there is a piece of his skull on Mount Athos and another bit in Munich. His right hand, with which he baptised Jesus, was taken to Antioch where once a year it was exposed. If the fingers were open it was to be a bountiful year, and if closed, there would be a poor harvest. A wrist bone is in France, an arm is in Turkey and another right hand is in Montenegro, and one in Greece and another in Bulgaria. It is tempting to agree with Frank Muir that saints are dead sinners who have been dug up and edited.

That's why when John the Baptist is brought up I prefer to remember a production of the musical *Godspell* I once saw. I remember the production because of a particular scene towards the beginning. At the back of the stage were eight actors. One at a time they came to the front centre stage and started to sing. Each sang a particular philosophy, something from Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Kant, socialism, communism, fascism, capitalism and so on. Each actor, for a moment, centre stage, singing their song, their way of looking on and moulding our shared life. Eventually all eight voices were singing their parts together in a very loud chorus of confusion. We saw that history had seen each song have its day and now we had to deal with all their noise and crossfire in the now, but we couldn't make sense of them and nobody knew who to listen to.

Then, all of a sudden, from the very back of the theatre a ram's horn was blown loudly and pierced the air and there was silence. John the Baptist slowly entered with a bucket of water, splashing it left and right, singing out alone and calling his world to be washed clean so that love could break in. "prepare ye, prepare ye, the way of the Lord" he sang louder and louder, dousing not only the actors but the audience, teaching us that not only did we need to wash out our mouths, our minds, our hearts, but that this love he was announcing would drench and refresh our humanity, would awaken us, would begin a new day in our lives, in our world. It was water, not for shallows to splash in, but to dive in deeper and feel the currents of our creator and source. He was a preacher and his message was that God loves us as we are but loves us so much he doesn't want us to stay like that. We need to turn our lives towards him which might mean turning round, that's the word he actually used, and resetting our compass.

Now one of the guidelines for any preacher is, 'preach from your scars and not from your wounds'. Well, here goes. To preach about this is fairly new to me, but, as St Augustine prayed in his *Confessions*, 'I tell my story for love of your love'.

I want to end by telling you about my mother. I was brought up by my grandparents. My parents divorced when I was two, my father got custody, but my grandmother stepped in to do the parenting. She died 6 weeks ago, aged 102. As a child, I grew up always having to tell people I didn't have a mother, mother's day was always awkward and even a hard day to preach on until quite recently actually. But as I

grew, I wondered why a mother had let her child go. My father's story was short and sour: 'she said I could have you and she'd have the car' he told me when I was five. I grew up believing that and all that goes with it. But also as I grew up I came to see my father more clearly and he and I parted company many years back. His son being gay was bad enough, being a priest was even worse.

And then, just two years ago my mother got in touch with me. Would I meet her? I sat there in a chaos of emotion but yes, yes I would. Where your fear is, there is your task. So I set off to the midlands and, one cold winter's day, rang her doorbell. Three hours were spent talking together. I knew nothing of her, but she had followed me all my life, knew where I'd been, what I'd done, even came to see me in a school play once. She said she was proud of me and that as she had dementia diagnosed, she wanted me to hear her story before it disappeared. Her lovely husband of 40 years held her hand as she began. It is not the place to recount it all now, but it is enough to say that, what with her serious postnatal depression, an attempt to end her life, and a husband keen to show she was not stable, he won the court order and her life was severed from mine. And as I sat there, all that I had ever been told, all that I had taken for granted, all that narrative I had repeated and recited and believed about her and me and those early days, was shaken and I saw a new story had to be born in me. My mother was to be seen with new eyes. Even I had to be seen differently. She had never preferred a car to me. In her story, gently told to me with just a hint of her memories leaving harbour, everything was being changed. I went home, as it says of the Magi, by a different road. Life seemed more welcoming somehow. She had at last been able to give me something loving, the truth, and some internal full stop felt it was turning into a comma.

You see John, with his water and ramshorn, is rupturing the world as we know it, the world that reduces us, tires us, breaks us, frightens us, make us competitors, consumers, anxious and grabbing, believing this is all just survival of the fittest, (though fit for what?) a world declared by some leaders as a deadly play pen of winners and losers, of the best versus the rest, well, that hellish state of affairs is shown to be false, is shown up to be what it is, a false godless narrative in which, when lived out, human beings are simmered down and our beautiful dignity, God gifted, is eclipsed from view. Contrary to the prayer of Jesus, this is making it on earth as it is in hell.

John knows that revelation means re-evaluation, and he is making way for the one who will come and take up the song of beatitude, his cousin Jesus, helping us see that the blessed are those with fragile spirits, those who live with loss, those whose ego doesn't take over, and those with some mercy in them, those who believe that there is something called righteousness, who want justice, those who make peace, and those who get put down and injured because they believe all this to be true and the good news that this world so urgently needs to hear. And when asked what is most important of all, he sings the song back with a simple refrain: love, love with everything you have, love God, love your neighbour.

My mother helped me, bravely after 53 years, to see things, everything I thought I'd understood, in a dislocating but warmer light. At a time when we have never had so many words but never been so disinclined to believe them, at a time when the boundaries between facts and opinions and lies, are publicly disappearing, and a time when there is heightened self-promotion coupled with a low self-awareness, we need John to splash that water around – and urgently – because the story we live in is the story we will live out.

For over 1000 years there has been a church here in this community. This building is just a part of the Christian community's life and witness here. Its task through the centuries was as it is today, to ensure people are living in the real story, of us being gifted into life, made for relationship, shaped to love even in loss, to understand that the heart of the human problem is always the problem of the human heart, and we need to distill, defrost, and be touched back into life worthy of the name. It is right that we celebrate history and always good to be loyal to the past. But your vocation here is the Christian one which is, most importantly, to be loyal to the future. The Church is what you do next. We need to start right now, here, inviting people into the story of love and grace, amend what needs putting right, plucking up the courage to say sorry to those we've hurt, to tell the ones we love that we love them and need them, and stop living live so self-focused and heartless to those who have real need that with a bit of will power and energy we can help with. God bless this church. God bless you in all the lies ahead. Thanks be to God for all you have inherited and all that is promised. The horn is blowing, the water is out. It's time to refresh your Christian heart and live the story. Right now, because, as Evelyn Waugh once said, the saddest words in the English language are, 'too late'.