

Sermon Feast of John the Baptist 2018

A couple weeks ago, while having my breakfast, the last story of the radio news bulletin caught my attention: of an American televangelist who was asking his followers to pay for a US \$54 million jet, and that his fourth private plane (making a private fleet the same size as Donald Trump's!). The 'prosperity gospel' pastor, Jesse Duplantis, had told his followers that today Jesus would probably take a pass on riding on the back of a donkey: "He'd be on an airplane preaching the gospel all over the world." Somewhat predictably, social media lit up in reaction and disgust. And fairly, too, I must say. Duplantis and his brand of religion requiring a \$54 million dollar jet makes a mockery of the faith and just confirms so many of secular suspicions of the church.

How important it is, then, that we have before us today this feast of John Baptist, to remind us of the critical need to challenge false prophets, the constant need to be reminded of the *authentic* gospel of Jesus Christ. This feast gives us opportunity to remember the *gift* of the challenging voice, the disconcerting voice, the voice which shakes us from our complacency, which points the way, which shows us our errors, which highlights the way of truth.

In the New Testament mind, John Baptist is the last of the prophets. His single vocation is to 'prepare the way' for the One who is revealed as The Way. But John's ministry *remains* a gift to us because it highlights for us the need for a witness that is bold and courageous, which pulls us against the flow of things, and which (at times) is frankly plain odd. *We still need* the voices which challenge, confront, unsettle and move us. Yes, those voices need to be heard in the church. But as Israel's prophets show and John Baptist himself, God's word is spoken *to all*: the rich and poor, the lowly and mighty. Like John Baptist, and the prophets of old, *we too* can offer insight and critique.

It always seems curious to me how readily sections of the church abandon the prophetic call in favour of being 'relevant' and 'attractive'. In the biblical imagination, dancing to the tune of the age only and ever leads to apostasy and disaster. It's good to remember that the perspective of faith gives us an important view of things. The perspective of eternity gives us a good vantage point... *We can* say things which need to be said. We can offer a perspective which ought to be heard. Our view of the world, and of the human person borne of centuries of reflection and lived experience is a priceless treasure!

Now, the world around us doesn't like that assertion very much. It believes faith can only be private and personal. But if we listen to that, then we undermine an essential aspect of our Christian identity. More than ever, another voice needs to be heard to show forth an alternative vision of human life. This is where we need to regain our voice: to keep asserting an authentic Christian vision, even if it seems no one is listening. The efforts to silence Christians surely reveals that we are saying something that needs to be heard. Because there *does need* to be a voice which challenges the powerful world views at work in our world today – powerful forces which press hard against us all. But all of them, without expectation, fail to satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart. Their great failure is that they cannot offer a comprehensive vision of humanity which both preserves human dignity and offers humankind hope.

So, there needs to be a voice which challenges the idea that human life can best be advanced by an emphasis on the primacy of freedom of choice. The battle cry is autonomy. The defining ethic is about 'being true to yourself' and from this comes the culture of 'rights.' Everyone has the 'right' to define the meaning of your life. And it's the *sincerity* of your *personal* conviction that gives you your own moral authority for your own views. Ten years ago, when addressing the UN General Assembly in New York, Benedict XVI – one of the great underrecognized prophets of our age – warned that the contemporary, post-enlightenment secular world was 'living on borrowed time'. The modern human rights movement, he rightly said, is rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and if you cut off from those roots the fruits will go bad, and society will collapse into a cacophony of special interest arguments. We might say that's the point we have reached now.

So too, there needs to be a voice which challenges the idea the human society can simply be understood as the struggle of power. It is argued that there are deep currents in human culture which informs our thinking, which shape our interpretation of things, and either privilege us or disempower us in ways we fail to see. The concern then is not so much rights, but power and the overturning of social conventions is what will set us free. Ultimately, everything has to be overturned, urged on by militant calls for radical cultural transformation. Yes, that's what we're living through now, as we all confront the tiresome fragmentation of our world by politics of identity.

And we need a voice which also challenges the idea that the great philosophical and religious visions of the past must be discarded for the modern scientific revolution. The battle cry is progress as modern science claims it has exposed (supposedly) the illusion of our religious past and makes room for a better society and a more rational world. The twin motors of 'progress' being scientific knowledge and better technology. A better humanity is material; better medicine and food, the right to prolong life and fend off death. Universal education and the use of life-enhancing technologies is the hope of the future.

In those powerful (but ultimately incompatible) world views, there may well be things that resonate with us, that we identify with to some degree or other. And impossible to escape if in any stage of education. *But they fail.* They all fail to acknowledge our dependence upon a reality greater than ourselves. *It is the human thirst to belong to something greater than ourselves* that haunts modern man. Family life has collapsed. Religion is alien to most. And into the gap has stepped the state, a fearsome alternative with its all-inclusive, all-encompassing agenda. To the state we have handed over life and death, sex, marriage and family, the raising of children and education. Everything and everyone one must come under its terrifying umbrella. This too needs to be challenged. *We* need to challenge it. All these reductions to human life and human dignity authentic faith *does* address. The opposing world views which press hard against us fail to offer humanity answers to the questions of ultimate meaning. They do not answer – because they *cannot* answer – the deepest questions, the profoundest longings of the human heart.

In the narrative of the birth of John the Baptist the giving of his name is given much space. The giving of a name highlights the crucial Christian belief that the heart of our being, the core of our identity, the truth of our very selves is given us by God. Other voices may well insist on other options. True for Zechariah and Elizabeth as for us! It takes resolve to accept what God gives. We know who we are, we come to know our destiny and our calling, only in reference to what is shown us by God. John's whole life unfolds according to that pattern. The great gift of his life and witness, his true prophetic message, is that human fulfilment is gained by humble orientation to God. *He must increase. I must decrease* he will say.

The dominant forces of our world will tell us life is about rights and personal autonomy, or about the struggle of powers, or about the advancement of science and technology. But they offer us a view of life that is impoverished, leaving us either without a core ethic of human dignity or an ultimate hope. The life and witness of John shows instead – as do all the great saints and sages - how human dignity and our ultimate hope rests in God. Besides Jesus, in the New Testament it is John which shows us that following Jesus is not a hobby. Being a person of faith is not a part-time occupation.

Now, the moral authority of the church is currently seriously depleted. So, whatever the church says in the public sphere must be done with a certain high degree of humility and grace. But we do have important things – legitimate things – that need to be said and ought to be heard. More than ever the church needs to be – *we* need to be – offering a critical voice to the forces which shape our world and so show where true dignity and true hope lies. Amen.