

Influencers – John the Baptist

We will all have times in our lives when we need some direction but hopefully not in the way that Robert Kupferschmid did. Robert was an 81-year old man, who in 1998 was flying from Indianapolis to Muncie, Indiana in a plane piloted by his friend, Wesley Sickle. During the flight Wesley collapsed at the controls and the plane began to nose-dive. Robert had no flying experience but was forced to fly the airplane -he got on the radio and pleaded for help.

Nearby two pilots heard the call. They gave Robert a steady stream of instructions on flying the plane and directed him to the nearest airport. Emergency vehicles were called out and ready for what seemed like an approaching disaster. Witnesses said the plane's nose nudged the center line and bounced a few times before the tail hit the ground. The plane ended up in a patch of soggy grass next to the runway. Amazingly, Robert was not injured. He had been in need of direction and when he received it he listened and followed the directions that he was given and doing so saved his life.

Today I am continuing the series that I have been doing occasionally over the last 18 months looking at Influencers from the bible, people who through the way that they lived their lives – the things that they did and the things that they said – influenced not just those around them but those who came after them right through to the present day and will continue to influence others in the future. I have previously done five services in the series and these are all available as YouTube videos and in text if you are interested. Today as the next in the series we are looking at the story of John the Baptist.

John the Baptist is someone who has long fascinated me because he seems to be the antithesis of what the modern world often teaches us to be – it seems ironic to call him an influencer as no-one could be more unlike a modern day influencer who focuses on self-promotion and increasing their followers. Everything John does is focussed on one thing – pointing people towards Jesus Christ. As another John, the apostle, writes in chapter 1 of his gospel, “He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light”. John was a relative of Jesus as Luke tells us that his mother Elizabeth was a relative of Mary, mother of Jesus, possibly cousins.

John’s coming had been long predicted. The Prophet Isaiah was speaking of John when he said “A voice of one calling: “In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord, make straight in the desert””. John was a powerful speaker, preaching a message of repentance, calling on those who heard him to turn away from sin and turn towards God. People were drawn to him, particularly as there had not been a prophet for hundreds of years. The people in John’s day were aware of the Old Testament prophecies that one day God would send the Messiah, who would deliver them from the oppression that they were living in under the rule of the Romans. Given this it is understandable that they were keen for the Messiah to deliver them from their situation. As a result some people came to the conclusion that John was the promised messiah but John answers them in v16 when he tells them “I baptise you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie”. Again John is pointing them away from himself and towards Jesus.

So what can we learn today from John’s example.

John was a hugely popular preacher with thousands following him. They thought that he could be their saviour but John was quick to correct them. To point others towards Christ we must not allow people to exalt us. In everything that we do we should work to exalt Christ rather than ourselves. Faithful Christians, like John, exalt Jesus. That is the hallmark of faithful service: to exalt the person and work of Jesus. John the Baptist would not allow people to exalt him. Instead, he pointed people to Jesus and set an example which all of us are called to follow. If we had people hanging on our

every word like John did it is easy for that kind of attention to go to our heads. Many well-meaning and devout Christians are led astray when they begin receiving recognition for their service. We don't see John fall into this trap and our passage today gives us a glimpse into John's humility. We also see this in John's gospel when John is walking with two of his disciples and they see Jesus passing by, so John says "Look, the Lamb of God!" He literally points his disciples towards Jesus so they left John and started following Christ. John has one job: to prepare the way for Jesus. He doesn't get distracted building his own following or building up his profile so he is happy for his disciples to move to following Jesus. The apostle John sums it up well when he says, "He must become greater; I must become less" (John 3:30). This sets us an example for how our mindset should be. In Church's we can become focussed on our own "success" whether that be membership, finances or external recognition but John's example shows us that our focus should be on how Christ is being exalted not on how we are.

If we focus on exalting ourselves it can be tempting to tell people what they want to hear so that they like us more – but again John tells people not what they want to hear but what they need to hear. In particular, John recognises that people can't come to Christ without first confronting their sin. John's message is different to Christ because he doesn't have the whole Bible – I sometimes think of John as the bridge between the old Prophets and Christ's gospel. John is in some ways the last old testament Prophet as he warns people of the "wrath of God" as he does at the start of the chapter we read from and he further emphasises in v17 of our reading. "His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." (3:17). Whilst it might not immediately make sense to us this image would be recognised by John's followers. When a farmer harvested his crop, he would thresh the grain to separate the kernel of wheat from the outer shell or chaff. Then he would take a winnowing fork – similar to a pitchfork to lift the harvested wheat into the air when there was a breeze. The chaff would blow to the side, while the heavier wheat would fall to the ground. The chaff would be swept up for burning. John is telling the people that they face two possible destinies - either by God's grace they become wheat and bear fruit unto eternal life; or, by remaining hardened in their sin they face the unquenchable fire. It can be tempting when talking about the Gospel to avoid the horrors of hell and be almost apologetics on behalf of God. Of course it is important to spread the message of hope that comes through following Christ but it is important not to downplay what the alternative is – as the apostle John writes "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them." (John 3:36).

So in this way John continues the pattern of Old Testament prophets but unlike the Old Testament prophets for whom the sacrifice of animals was the way to cleanse sin, John called people to repent, be baptised and confess their sins as the new way. his message is a call for people to repent, to recognise the sin of their life and to turn away from that life as he prepares the way for Christ. When pointing people towards Christ it can be tempting to try to soften the message to make it more palatable to those who we talk to – but John shows us the importance of telling people what they need to hear, not what they want to hear.

Doing that can require courage. Directing others to Christ can call us to step outside of our comfort zones and in some cases can be dangerous but we are called to have courage. Again John sets an example for us to follow. We heard in our reading that John was prepared to call Herod out for the sinful way that he was living. John would have known that rebuking a tyrannical Roman official who could imprison and execute him was extremely dangerous but he still does it – because he knows that it is what he is being called by God to do and it ends up with him locked up in prison. Now I am not advocating that you go and find a political official and berate them as John did but when we are

called to do something by God that involves taking a risk or has an element of danger our faith calls us to approach this calling with courage, knowing that God will provide what we need. Our congregation has a mission partnership with a charity called the Cambodian Hope Organisation or CHO based in Poipet a town on the border of Cambodia and Thailand. As part of this partnership I have been out to Cambodia on two occasions with others in the congregation to see the work of the charity. On my first visit we were taken to see a building that CHO had recently agreed to buy and told some of the plans that they had for the building including a café and a school teaching sewing. During this conversation Chomno, the founder of CHO, explained to us that the charity only had a small fraction of the money needed to buy the building but their faith meant that they were confident that God would provide the funds needed to complete the purchase. When I returned 6 years later we went back to that building which had been transformed and the café and sewing school were well established. The money they needed had been provided – their faith had been rewarded. What courage they showed to take that risk knowing that if the money didn't appear it could have ruined the charity. Again this challenges us – some of you may have heard me say before that Faith is a 4 letter word spelt R-I-S-K. How much are we prepared to risk for our faith – our reputations, our financial resources like CHO or even our lives as John did?

Just to be clear this isn't a call to you all to go out tomorrow and give all your money away or become a missionary in a dangerous country – although we may be called to do this – as John showed us, everything that we do should be to point people towards Jesus. CHO and John weren't taking risks for the sake of it but so that others may see God at work through them.

Just as I said earlier – we should not focus on exalting ourselves – conversely we should focus on exalting Jesus. Like a mirror reflects light we should be mirrors of Christ so that when people look at us they see Christ through us. John has been baptising people with water as an outward sign of their repentance but he recognises the limit of this physical act so when he compares his baptism using water with Jesus' baptism by the Holy Spirit and fire, he is saying that Jesus does inwardly what John's ministry outwardly symbolizes. Being baptised with water is a sign to others of our faith, but it is of no effect unless it is accompanied by Jesus' baptism which changes us inwardly. Receiving Jesus' baptism leads our hearts to want to exalt him – not because it is the price of Grace, but a response to it. It calls us to show Christ in all that we do whether that is through our work, through our school or university, through our time with friends and family – we are called to follow John's example and exalt Christ in everything that we do.

If I return to Robert Kupferschmid whose story I told at the start – I cannot imagine the terror that he felt as he watched his friend collapse and realised that he would have to fly the plane – it would have been easy to lose his head in which case the consequences would have likely been deadly but when he received direction he listened to it and followed and as a result his life was saved. Some of you this morning may be going through scary or challenging times at the moment, the pandemic has been a scary time for all of us as our way of life has changed completely – at these times it can be tempting to turn away from Christ and ignore his call on our life but in John the Baptist we have someone who is providing us with direction. We can decide to ignore John's direction but as he told his follower's we must be prepared to face God's wrath. If instead we listen and follow where he is directing us – towards Christ, then we too can be saved through God's grace and then we too can become like John, pointing people towards Christ.

Amen