



The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

Homily for the Feast of the Nativity of S John the Baptist (24th June) 2026

The authors of the Gospels present the figure of Saint John the Baptist very much in terms of a place within the run-up to the coming Ministry of Christ. He is the forerunner, who prepares the way for that Ministry. As such, as the Office Hymn for today puts it, he was the, " Greatest and last of Israel's line of prophets."

The author of the Epistle today suggests that this was the purpose of all prophecy - pointing the attention of unfolding generations to the coming of the figure, whom they called the Messiah; and yet, in fact, much of what the Prophets had to say related not to what was to come in the future, but what should be in the present. They inveigh against the injustices of their time and the serial failures to honour the Covenant, which made them the Chosen People.

This is true also of Saint John. In the Eucharistic Preface, we shall recall that, "By shedding his blood he gave his last and greatest witness." This had no direct connexion with the coming of the Messiah, but resulted from his very in-the-moment critique of Herod's cynical and illicit power-play.

Very often, the coming of the Messiah was seen in terms of a figure coming to sweep away the corruptions and evils of the contemporary society: it would be somebody to do it for the people: hence the welcome offered to Jesus on the first Palm Sunday - a hoped for man of courage, who would put his head above the parapet in a way that others did not dare to do.

However, as we hear in the Gospels, John expected people to make their own efforts - to come to the Jordan and repent of their sins before being washed in the river's waters. This was not a matter of sitting and waiting for someone else to do it all, but an invitation to people to look within themselves for the resolve to resist the lures of sin and corruption and to recognise where they had failed.

Of course, as we have come to understand, there is a gap between what we might achieve and what only God can accomplish through the Sacrifice of Christ. However, it is implied in the ministry of Saint John that we have to have to move ourselves to the edge of that gap by, as it says at the beginning of Saint Mark's Gospel, repenting of our human frailty and believing the Gospel - that is developing a living belief, which embraces the perspectives inherent in the preaching, teaching and example of Christ.

As the life of Saint John makes clear, this is not just a matter of personal holiness - though, of course, that is crucial to the enterprise. It also includes seeking to sanctify the society around us, resisting the institutionalisation of human frailty in the way that society acts and develops.

As I say, we often speak of John as preparing the way for Jesus; but, in fact, we might more accurately phrase his role as preparing us for Jesus. The distinction takes us away from a notion that John simply sets the scene for His arrival towards an understanding that we all need to prepare to welcome Jesus - at least to be heading towards the gap that only He can bridge the gap between our own desire to find reconciliation with God and the Redemption from our failure that only He can secure.