

BBC RADIO FOUR 'SUNDAY WORSHIP'

FEAST OF THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD

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Here in St. David's Cathedral we are taking care of a beautiful bronze statue of St. John the Baptist. It was one of many bronze and stone statues created by the famous Cardiff sculptor William Goscombe John. By the end of the 1890's he had established himself as 'Wales national sculptor' and much of his work both at Cardiff Castle and beyond was created for the Marquis of Bute, the great benefactor of this city.

Some people say Goscombe John's statue is forbidding and threatening, not least because it looks down on people from a great height of It certainly provokes a feeling of wonder and awe. The gospels portray John as a startling figure too. According to Matthew, John described himself as *"The voice of one crying in the wilderness"*. He wore a garment made from camel's hair, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Mark, also, speaks of John as being *"...clad in a garment of camel's hair, with a girdle around his waist, and eating locusts and wild honey"*. But it was what he said that perhaps made him most frightening of all. *"Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand"* (Mat 3:2). And to those who came for Baptism he said: *"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"* (Mt 3:7). Some biblical scholars describe John the Baptist as the last of the Old Testament prophets. So powerful and frightening was his preaching that even a committee from the Sanhedrin asked him *"Are you the Christ of the Messiah?"* *"No, I am not"* he said. *"Well, are you Elijah risen from the dead?"* He said *"No, I am John. My name is not Elijah"*. *"Well are you the Prophet, the One spoken of by Moses when he said : After I am gone, God will raise you up another prophet like me, and him you shall hear"*. (Deut. 18:15). Despite these denials, John still preached in the words of

the prophet Isaiah: *“The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare a way for the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled in, and every mountain and hill shall be laid low”*.

It was in 1947 that a young shepherd boy found a way into the caves in Qumran, a dry and arid place near the Dead Sea in Israel. The Dead Sea is 1.294 feet below sea level and the desert around it is dry and arid. Hidden in those caves were scrolls, which had been preserved for two thousand years, revealing the presence of a community living there. These people had given up on the economic and cultural life of Jewish society. They even abandoned worship in the Temple and had withdrawn to the desert to live a life of asceticism, reading apocalyptic literature and waiting for the coming of the Messiah. Some scholars identify John the Baptist with this community, not least with his radical way of life. If this is true, he was also a maverick, leaving the community and going to confront the Pharisees. They were the doctors of the law. He preached to the Sadducees. They were the aristocrats of the Temple. He even confronted King Herod himself. *“It is not right for you to take your brother’s wife”* (Mark 6:18).

The community at Qumran, like many Jewish sects, used the precious gift of water for the many washings, cleansings and purifications associated with their religious practice time and time again. If we accept that John had broken away from the rather introverted Qumran community and struck out on his, was it because he was aware that the waiting was over, “the end time had come” and the Messiah was at hand? In the light of his preaching, it is easy to see John’s baptising as more than a ritual cleansing to be repeated again and again. It was something definitive, a total change of a way of life, a realisation that the kingdom of God was about to be revealed. *“I baptise you with water, but someone will come who will baptise you with the Holy Spirit”* (Lk 3:16).

If we see John as the last of the prophets of the Old Testament, we can certainly understand Jesus as the first prophet of the New Testament. Of the

many lessons we can learn from his baptism by John, surely one must be the link between Old Testament expectation and its fulfilment in the New Testament. This is made clear in the first sermon of Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth recorded in the gospel of Luke. Using the language of the prophet Isaiah Jesus says:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

Because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives

And recovering of the sight to the blind,

To set at liberty those who are oppressed,

To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord”.

He concluded with these powerful words:

“Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing”. (Lk4:6-21)

Baptism remains one of the most powerful symbols in the life of the Church. Like John the Baptist, we may not understand the full significance of what we are doing but in faithfulness not just to the words of Jesus but the example of Jesus we follow his steps in faith. Yes, we can easily relate to water as a symbol of life, a symbol of cleansing and purification. But when we finally come to understand what it means, that somehow we go down into the depths of the grave with Jesus. That we are dead not just because of the impact of sin, which deadens our awareness, and perhaps even our desire for the things of God. It reminds us that the death of Jesus on the cross is a sign that nothing need ever separate us from the love of God. In his rising from death he takes the whole human race with him in one great act of forgiveness, transformation and new life. If only we could understand it.