

15 December 2024 Isaiah 61:1-4 and John 1: 6-8 and 19-28: Working.

Take a moment to think about your job, or maybe your whole career path.

Did you have a clear idea of what you wanted to do when you were a child? Did your plans change? Did you feel at any time that your work was just what God intended you to do?

Science is yet to decide how much a baby knows while still in utero, but there's one baby in the Bible who recognised the son of God before he was born. Luke tells us that when Elizabeth saw Mary, she was filled with the Holy Spirit and shouted out, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!... As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy."

However, that is not the beginning of the story of John the Baptist. Isaiah tells us in chapter 40:3 about him:

A voice of one calling: 'In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.' Inspired by the Spirit of God, this prophet will clear the way for the Son of God, the Son of Man. He will teach and reprimand and call God's people to prepare themselves for the coming of the Lord.

Isaiah, gives us a very precise and demanding job description. A person sent to bring good news to the poor, freedom to the imprisoned, healing and comfort for those who are wounded or in despair, renewal and new life. No CV needed, no online interview. There's only one person for this job.

Jesus is conceived holy and born consecrated, destined to accomplish this colossal sacred task. Jesus himself confirms Isaiah's predictions in the verses we call the beatitudes, in Matthew 5:1-12. In the temple Jesus chooses to read, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, Because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, And recovery of sight to the blind, To set free those who are oppressed, To proclaim the favourable year of the Lord." (Luke 4:18-19)

He reads and then announces, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). A sense of completeness, when we read this. Isaiah listened to God, Jesus confirms the truth. This is his job and vocation.

Returning to the story of John the Baptist: Zechariah, his father-to-be, sees an angel who tells him that their prayers are answered and Elizabeth will have a child, despite her old age. The child is to be called John, not, as was customary, Zechariah, after his father.

When the baby is born, Zechariah sings a wonderful song acknowledging John's role as messenger and herald of the arrival of God's own son. Luke 1:76-78 'And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, ⁷⁷ to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, ⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God.'

At a certain moment, John receives the wake-up call. Time to go. Like a fireman, who has been training, practising, learning the procedure, the alarm sounds, and without hesitating, he's off. Time to start on his mission. The work so clearly defined for him by Isaiah, 750 years before his conception. A prophet with the spirit of Elijah, says Malachi.

John the Baptist sets off, lecturing anyone and everyone with his message. He is not the light but is here to testify that the light is coming. His aim is for everyone to hear the message of repentance and salvation and to publicly affirm that new faith by accepting baptism. When challenged by some smartly dressed officials from head office, he is quite clear: he is not the Messiah, not the prophet and he is not Elijah. His job is to baptise in anticipation of the arrival of some great personage, whose sandals he is not worthy to untie.

Those officials must have gone away disturbed, unsettled, maybe even fearful or in awe. What was he saying? Should they prepare for a great king?

John does not hesitate to speak his mind, (could he have been a Yorkshireman?) calling people a generation of vipers in Luke 3 verse 7. He preaches on caring and sharing in verse 11, and he warns the authorities that justice must be seen to be done.

God's judgement is near, he says. Examine your conscience, join the group, and lead a righteous life.

Is this all history or is there some relevance for us here and now?

Many of us are baptised, many confirmed. How many have deeply repented? Is there something lingering at the back of our memories, something we are utterly ashamed of? Time to bring that to God. Everything. No excuses. No, 'I couldn't help it', 'if so-and-so hadn't wound me up', 'if I hadn't been in that situation'. Then wait for that incredible, overwhelming joy of knowing that we are totally forgiven, thoroughly loved, through and through.

I return to my initial question. Your job. Did you feel drawn to the career you chose? I doubt if many of us experienced the extraordinary signs which presaged the arrival of our Lord Jesus and John the Baptist. However, we may well have felt one path was a better fit than another. Certainly, I was truly grateful for the opportunity to go into teaching, a profession which was enormously rewarding for me (and not too tedious for my students, I hope!).

Are we living a life of righteousness at work as well as here on Sundays? If we are in a position where it's difficult to lead that principled life, a workplace environment where the culture is toxic, could we move to something different? I know someone who has done just that. This is John the Baptist's job description for us, to live the faith driven life.

God had a career path and a person specification in mind for each of us from before we were knitted together in our mothers' wombs. What does he demand of us? While awaiting our calling, let's spread love, care for one another, and call out injustice whenever we encounter it.

God, who had a career path and a person specification in mind for each of us from before we were knitted together in our mothers' wombs, what does he demand of us? Spread love, care for one another, and call out injustice whenever we encounter it.

So, let's tell people our story. Let's talk about all the good things that our faith has brought us. Of course, I don't mean things! I mean shared joy, comfort in difficult times, hope when we might despair, miraculous healing, deep peace. Matthew 5 verse 16 says

'Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in heaven.'

Amen

Fleur Pelly, 15 December 2024