

Nativity of St John the Baptist 2020 (St Faith's)

Today we thank God for the birth of John the Baptist, sent to prepare the way for Jesus. This morning's Gospel presents John as fulfilling the prophecy of the first reading: *Prepare ye the way of the Lord*. Who knows how Isaiah thought God would fulfil his promise, but many centuries later Christians would be in no doubt that the miraculous events of the births of John the Baptist and Jesus should be understood in this way.

This can hardly have ever been more relevant than now during this time of global crisis. It's all about the reliability of God as Lord of history. To put it directly in words I quoted at the beginning of this Eucharist, *God knows what he is about*. Therefore *we can trust him*.

Just a bit of background to start with. When Isaiah wrote those wonderful words "*Comfort ye, comfort ye*", God's people were in exile, their holy city destroyed, their holy places desecrated. It must have fallen on their ears as wishful thinking. Do you remember: *The grass withereth, the flower fadeth, because the Spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass*. It was a terrible time. Of course there had been prophets aplenty promising better times to come - those preaching *Peace, peace, when there was no peace*. But these promises were built on sand, and everyone knew it.

And now there came a prophet who admitted that things were every bit as bad as they had thought, but who also reassured them that although *The grass withereth and the flower fadeth*, in other words, even though terrible calamities had come upon them, *the word of our God shall stand for ever*.

Isaiah knew that the whole of human history is in God's hands, *he knows what he is about*.

This was John the Baptist's message too. God is about to act in a new a decisive way in the ministry of Jesus, and people needed to be ready for it.

For John, none of this was abstract theory. He didn't invite his hearers to think about the long distant past or even to understand Isaiah's teaching correctly. No! He simply told them to repent, because God was about open his kingdom to everyone who would receive it. Don't worry about what other people are up to, what about you? Are you willing to get a completely new mind, turning away from all the failures, sins and shortcomings of your life up to this point, and walking from henceforth in God's holy ways? It's your choice.

This where God's reliability comes in. If God is as consistently merciful as Isaiah said he was, it's worth risking all to trust him. It's not only the course of history of which God is Lord. It is each and every one of us.

At the beginning of this Eucharist I quoted some words from Cardinal Newman. Here's a bit more from the same passage:

*God has created me
to do him some definite service.
He has committed some work to me
which he has not committed to another.
I have a mission.
I never may know it in this life
but I shall be told it in the next.*

This is a direct message to us all as individuals and as a human race, during the present pandemic. Of course, we all hope the virus will go away or at least become less of a threat. It is right to implore God to deliver us. But there's not much point in doing so, if we are not willing to make some pretty profound changes to our lives in order to play our allotted part in God's great plan.

So listen again to my paraphrase of John the Baptist's teaching a moment ago:
*Repent, because God has opened his kingdom to everyone who will receive it.
Don't worry about what other people are up to, what about you? Are you
willing to get a completely new mind, turning away from all the failures, sins
and shortcomings of your life up to this point, and walking from henceforth in
God's holy ways?*

It's your choice -- but God can be relied on.