

Holy Trinity Headington Quarry 24/6/07 10.00am
Birth of John the Baptist
Acts 13:14-26; Luke 1:57-66,80

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

The fact that the Feast of the Birth of John the Baptist falls today, 24th June, is often seen to be symbolic. In exactly six months' time, we will be celebrating another feast, Christmas Eve – and it is no coincidence that these festivals take place at the same time as the summer and winter solstices. A rather nice explanation is offered by St Augustine of Hippo, with whom I've been spending far too much time recently. Writing in the days when the solstice still fell on 24th June, before Pope Gregory put the calendar out of synch, he suggested that these feast days were a direct application of John 3:30, when John the Baptist says of Jesus: "He must increase, but I must decrease". Augustine, of course, saw John's decreasing as the days getting shorter, whereas after Christmas the days get longer as Jesus, the Light of the World, increases.

That may seem to be a rather contrived explanation. But that line itself, "He must increase, but I must decrease", remains central to the Christian message.

Yesterday, I joined three thousand other pilgrims from all over the Church of England, and beyond, in St Alban's Abbey, to celebrate the feast of St Alban (which occurred on Friday). The story of St Alban is told by Bede in his Ecclesiastical History. St Alban's was the Roman town of Verulamium, on Watling Street, guarded by a Roman garrison. One night, a Christian priest came, seeking shelter, in danger of his life, since the Romans were even then trying to stamp out this new religion. The tradition has it that Alban was a soldier – not the best house perhaps in which to ask for refuge. But when the priest came, Alban took him in and hid him. Presumably, they had some chance to talk about the faith for which the priest risked his life.

Eventually the authorities tracked the priest down, and sent out a party to arrest him. At this point, Alban did a remarkable thing. He swapped clothes with the priest, so that the priest could go free and Alban, wearing the priest's cloak, was arrested instead, facing certain death in the priest's place. Of course, the switch of identity was soon found out, and Alban had to appear before the court. First they asked for his name and family, which he refused to give: he said they were not important. Then, finally he proclaimed: "I am Alban, and I worship and adore the

true and living God.” As he would not betray the priest to whom he had given shelter or give up his new-found faith, Alban was duly executed, on the hill when now St Alban’s Abbey stands. (There are various gory stories about the execution, but if you want those, you’ll have to read Bede’s Ecclesiastical History for yourself.)

What St Alban did can truly be described as counter-cultural, going against the accepted behaviour of his society, firstly because of his charity, his hospitality, and secondly because of the faith to which that charity led. In fact, it may even run counter to the culture of our modern church. The service sheet yesterday made the following observation: “Alban died unbaptized, never having attended a church service, without owning or reading a Bible, without ever serving on a committee or taking part in a training scheme, yet he gave his life for his faith in Jesus Christ, a faith which transcends all Christian divisions and disagreements.”

John the Baptist is also a counter-cultural figure: “He must increase, but I must decrease.” In a society where we pay so much attention to our personal status or outward appearance, the call to set these aside in favour of something or something else strikes a discordant note. We could go so far as to say that his message is quite unattractive. He calls people to repent, to face the things in their life which they’d rather forget, which embarrass them, which they want to hide rather than admit. But these are the things which keep us from God. And if we want to know God, then we must first be prepared for God to know us. That can be quite uncomfortable, because it involves stripping away all those protective layers which we’ve built up: the veneer of pride, the way we present ourselves, the masks we wear. And it doesn’t stop there. Even once we have been baptised and been welcomed into the Church, the fellowship of the redeemed, there is a danger that we might grow complacent, beginning to replace the old sins with new ones – which we can all too easily justify to ourselves as their context seems to be holy.

John continues to set the example: “He must increase, but I must decrease.”

Becoming a Christian does not mean that we have to deny who we are, or curl up in a small corner and hope that nobody notices us. Christians are no less active in the public world – far from it; we often find ourselves getting more involved once we have made a commitment of faith. But it’s not for our own glory: it is for God’s. Everything that we do, like John the Baptist, like St Alban, points towards God. And we do that in trust.

Later in Luke's Gospel we read how, when John was thrown into prison, he sent messengers to Jesus to ask "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus' answer is not straightforward: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me." Surely this roundabout response is to underline the importance of deeds rather than words. It tells us far more about who Jesus is and how God is working through him than a simple "yes" or "no". When people ask me whether Christianity is true, or whether it's worth coming to Church, I'd love to answer in the same way: to speak of lives changed, of people transformed, of communities working together, of love and joy and hope – all those signs which we interpret as God's presence and activity in our lives. That may not be the simple solution for which they were hoping, but like Jesus' response to John it means that they have to make their own minds up as to whether it answers their question.

So like John the Baptist, like St Alban, we are called to witness to God in faith, through our words and through our deeds. We must tell the Christian story – of the life of Jesus and the martyrs of old, but also of the effects we see in the world around us, showing that God is at work. It might not seem particularly Anglican for the Church of England to blow its own trumpet, but this is good news which we have. Moreover, we do not do it for our own glory, but for the glory of the one who works in us and through us: "He must increase, but I must decrease". **Amen.**