

Mark 6:14-29

SS. Peter & Paul, Wantage, 10.30am,
11/07/21

“The Coming King: Jesus and John the Baptist”

Pray

Introduction Why is it that every family has one relative who you can rely on to spoil a good party? – You know the sort of thing I mean: You’ve planned a big family Christmas gathering, and part of you is dreading it because you just know that Uncle Fred’s going to bore everyone with his stories of what Christmas was like during rationing again; or Aunt Marge is going to insist on telling you in gory detail about all the operations she’s had in the last ten years – and showing you the scars if you don’t escape quickly enough; or Cousin Bill is bound to pick a fight with your new neighbours about the football, or about Brexit, or the lifting of Covid restrictions, or the Royal Family – in fact with Cousin Bill, it doesn’t really matter what the topic is, he just can’t help getting into an argument whatever the occasion! – And as for your sister Lilly and her inappropriate dress-sense/boyfriends/music/language – delete the options as per your precise family circumstances – the less said about that, the better!

As I say, every family has – and I once heard it said that if you don’t know who the oddball is in your family one – then there’s a pretty good chance that it’s you! – In Nicky Gumbel’s excellent little booklet: *“Why Christmas?”*, he talks about a Mori poll that found that there are three million family rows each Christmas, and I remember some years ago being in a service where the preacher quoted that, and then added: *“Three million*

family rows each Christmas...And I bet some of you feel as though most of them take place in your house!”

Well, if you can relate to this concept of embarrassing relatives this morning, I’ve got good news for you: You’re in VERY good company. – Think about Jesus’ family for a moment: His father’s a carpenter, a nice respectable working craftsman in Nazareth; his uncle Zechariah’s a priest – you can’t get much more respectable than being a priest – at least, that’s what Benji’s hoping is the case as we ordain him priest today!

But then you’ve got Cousin John. – Oh dear! – Poor Cousin John: You can imagine the scene: The family’s all together, they’ve got their glasses and canapés in their hands: *“How are the children?”* – *“Fine. Fine.”* – *“What are they up to?”* – *“Apprentice fisherman? – Good. Good.”* – *“Taking a real shine to the carpentry business”* – *“You must be so proud”* – *“Training to be a Pharisee”* – *“Bit strict, but I suppose someone’s got to do it!”* – *“And John?”* – *“Hmmm? – Did you see that chariot race last week? – Gripping stuff, wasn’t it?”* – *“How’s John getting on?”* – *“Nice weather for the time of year isn’t it?”* – *“John: Your son John!”* – *“Oh: Well, we try not to talk about John much”*.

As I say, if you’ve got an embarrassing relative, then you’re in the best possible company. – Think about John the Baptist – cousin of Jesus – for a moment. – You turn up at the party in your best bib and tucker, and John’s there in a home-made tunic knitted together out of camel’s hair. You’re passing around the canapés, and you realise that John’s brought his own snacks, and – is that a bit of dead locust that he’s got hanging out of the side of his mouth? – And if his appearance and his smell

weren't bad enough, he takes one look at your most important guests – the local priests and lawyers, and, oh, you should hear the language! – *“You brood of vipers”* – *What makes you think God really values you as his children?*” – Little wonder that at the end of his life, as today's Gospel reading describes, John found himself on the wrong side of the authorities, thrown in prison by King Herod and finally executed by him.

John's message wasn't popular – then or now. But it's a message that I think we need to listen to and to take seriously: *“Flee! – Run! – Watch out! – The King is coming, and you guys are in big trouble!”* – As I say, not a populist message, but one that I think we need to hear this morning. – For, yes, Jesus is coming! – And, yes, that is good news! – That's the heart of the Gospel message you're being commissioned to proclaim, Benji, in your ordination as priest today. – But it's not just good news. – It's also startling, shocking, dangerous, world-changing news: And John's quite right to warn us that as well as getting ready to celebrate, we'd also better be ready to take action!

The King is coming! – That's the message that the prophets proclaimed. And that's the message that John the Baptist shouted out with all his rudeness and insensitivity. – Because when a King comes, you don't just celebrate: You'd better make sure you're ready to receive him. You'd better make sure that all your accounts are in order. You'd better make sure your home is in a fit state for the king to come into. – And when that king is Jesus, then the home he comes into ultimately is right in here – [point to heart] – and so it's not just a question of rushing round with the Hoover and splashing on a bit of fresh paint to cover the cracks in the wallpaper. – You'd better make

sure that your heart is really ready and really fit to welcome in a king.

Philippians 2 talks about the end of time when Jesus will be seen and proclaimed in all his kingly glory. – And we know the verses well: *“God has exalted Jesus to the highest place and given him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”*

– Great stuff! – Our King is coming! – But the reason John the Baptist – embarrassing though he doubtless was – the reason that his message was so important, is that we need to be ready: When the King comes, yes, we are told that everyone will acknowledge him, that indeed, every knee will bow before him, but the question will be this: Will we be ready to acknowledge him and bow before him as our Lord and Saviour? Or will he find us unprepared and therefore having to kneel before him as our Lord and Judge? – “Lord and Saviour” or “Lord and Judge”? – And John the Baptist's language may have been insensitive – actually, you'd have to admit that calling the local VIP's a *“brood of vipers”* shows serious style: it goes some way beyond being “a bit insensitive”! – but it mattered! – What he had to say mattered because they had to be warned – they needed to be ready – the king was coming and to those he found who weren't ready to welcome him he would indeed be bringing with him *“the coming wrath”*!

And John's warning back then needs to resonate with each one of us today: As we celebrate with Benji today his commitment to serve as a priest in the Church of God, then, yes,

we celebrate – of course we celebrate – the self-giving of Jesus is indeed “*Good News!*” – the best news – that the world has ever known: And Benji will proclaim that afresh every time he presides at the Eucharist. – We need to celebrate that self-giving of Jesus, that ultimate expression of love that the world has ever seen. – But as we do that, let’s heed the warning of John the Baptist, and make sure that we’re truly worshipping Jesus as the King: Let’s examine our hearts and repent where there are areas where we’ve shut him out. Let’s examine our lives and repent where there are areas where we’ve lived in ways that deny his Kingship. Let’s examine our relationships and repent where we’ve treated others in ways that ignore Jesus’ call for us to love our neighbours as we love ourselves. Let’s examine our values and repent where we’ve allowed the world around us to get in and squeeze Christ off the throne and instead we’ve been living for our – [shrug] – jobs, status, money, families, whatever. – John the Baptist is right: The King is coming, and that’s Good News – it can be the best news there ever is. – But we need to be ready: – Ready to follow the Messiah. – Ready to worship the King. – Let’s be quiet for a moment, and then I’ll pray.