

Before digital dialling and mobile phones, to phone out, we would go to a wall box, lift the receiver to an ear, whirl the handle, and a voice from the telephone exchange asked, "Number please?" Then, "Hold the line," while the operator plugged in the spaghetti wires, then, "I'm putting you through, now." Hopefully, the operator's voice would fade off the line. As Jesus faced his beginning ministry to change the world, he was an *unknown* from lowly, dullsville Nazareth. He needed John Baptist, like a phone operator, to connect him up, to put him through to the people.

In his growing, John Baptist had wrestled out in wilderness solitude with his life's calling. When he was sure that the promised messiah was close to hand, he alerted the people, saying "I am not the Messiah. No, Jesus is. I am simply a voice in the wilderness crying "Prepare the way for the Lord's coming. Warm your stony cold hearts." At Jesus' baptism, John pointed out Messiah's presence, "One who is more powerful than I is coming. I baptize with water. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. He will sweep clean the threshing floor and will gather his wheat into his granary. When Jesus stepped forward, John cried, "Here is the Lamb of God, the Son of God, who takes away the sin of the world." Like the phone operator, John Baptist had hooked up, connected folk to Jesus, then faded from the line.

In his world, John continued his denunciations of the erroneous ways of elite royalty and the religious establishment. "You brood of vipers! Even now, the axe is laid to your tree." His courageous outbursts took him too far. For openly and fearlessly denouncing Herod Agrippa for taking his brother's wife in adultery, (not a wise move with an Eastern despot), he was slammed into a dark dungeon on death row. From there, he sought comfort and assurance that his earlier public relations work, announcing the coming of Jesus, had been successful. John had been the last uncompromising Old Testament prophet. The Messiah he preached would be a stern judge, a dispenser of wrath, who would execute terrible punishment on sinful souls. In prison, he had heard whispers that Jesus may not be preaching the way he had pioneered. John became confused by doubt that Jesus did not fit his envisaged idea of messiah-ship. In fact, from what he heard, Jesus' words and deeds seemed a world away from John's imaginings. Instead of acting as a stern judge, Jesus radiated welcoming friendship and loving kindness.

In dungeon darkness, John, knowing his life was fast running out, was unable to see for himself the outcome of his work. So he sent disciples to check out Jesus: "*Are you the one who is to come or do we wait for another?*" To these, Jesus merely pointed to the works he was doing. He freely quoted the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, who had foretold the coming of a messiah of compassion and healing. He said, "The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead raised, and good news is given to the poor." (Isaiah 35:5-6) This last was a remarkable novelty. To lift up the poor was unheard of. The words from Isaiah were the very words Jesus had earlier read in the Nazareth synagogue, which had then riled his hearers to white-hot heat. Jesus addressed John's disciples: "Look around you. I am doing precisely what was predicted." Tell John Take comfort. It is all happening as foretold. (Luke 4:21) I must be a people-saving Messiah."

This change in emphasis was a seismic shift. It meant, all those once excluded from synagogue worship because of alleged sin-caused-disease, he now gathered to his thrall; all those whose lowly status had made them unacceptable to polite society, he lifted up;

all those are now to be welcomed into God's real society, the Christian community. None is to be excluded. Jesus concluded, "John, be at peace! The Holy One, for whom you were the way-preparer, has truly come. Blessed is anyone who takes no offence in me." (Read: who does not lose faith in me.)

What does this mean to us? On the one hand, we must ask ourselves, is Jesus the one for us, or are we waiting for someone/something else? How willing are we to live fully the Gospel way? Will we let Jesus' upside-down principles bear on our life? Do we believe that the last should now be first, where Jesus put them? Will we welcome home the wastrel son or daughter with a fattened calf as the father did? Will we give the last worker hired as much as the first? Will we welcome asylum seekers just as Mary and Joseph, with their baby, were welcomed into Egypt to be safe from an earlier Herod's manic mood? Will we open our eyes to see signs of Jesus, presence in the world and imitate the compassion of Christ who comes?

On the other hand, will we still fight to be first no matter whom we must push out of the way? Will we still wish to succeed at all costs, even if we drive ourself out of family respect and love? Will we still, at Christmas, choose to purchase and consume even more stuff, while millions of our sisters and brothers-in-need starve? Will we, when faith-shattering storms blow in life, seek to find dark places to brood alone, and will we feel so numbed and powerless by life, that we will doubt in darkness what we once affirmed in the light? Will we ever feel let down by every one, even God, and cry, "Enough is enough, God! Fair crack of the sauce bottle, God! You've had your fun!" and give up on God as a stale back number? When our children perhaps break our heart and, despite our years of witness and example, give up the practice of religion, will we still keep on coming to Church, to strengthen our faith-based continuing acceptance of them, and keep an ever-open door of loving kindness towards them?

If ever we find our selves with John Baptist in dungeon darkness, we need to hear Jesus tell us "God's mission is on track." Thank God, we have around us uncatalogued saints such as courageous Nelson Mandela, and we have our blessed weekly communion here at St George's through which we become companions (*com*-with, *panis*-bread=bread-sharers) to all we will meet in the coming week, and so we choose to become the nearest thing to Jesus we can be, for we truly know, *he is indeed the one who is come to help us*
Amen

Walter McEntee