

I think many of us can feel uncomfortable with the message of John the Baptist for a lot of reasons. Change, conversion of life, repentance - these are things that can and should disturb our present comfortable lifestyles. John the Baptist was the person that Jesus learned from - He associated Himself with John's message. I think John the Baptist is a powerful symbol for us, and a symbol we need to heed in the uncomfortableness of that symbol. John is very much a symbol of counterculture - going against the tide of where society is flowing. There's many things you could say about John and his message, but I've jotted down just a few, from which you can draw your own conclusions as to where they apply to you or to us today.

First of all, he preached and lived, of course, in the wilderness in Judea. It's interesting that the Christian tradition is always on the outside, about men and women who felt called to leave normal society and go into a sort of wilderness as a sort of passive protest. Nobody would normally choose the literal wilderness, it's a very odd thing to do, and I would say to you that one interpretation could be that it's anti-Empire - anti established order. I'm a great Star Wars fan, and one of the best of the series is The Empire Strikes Back. The Empire always does strike back. The oppressive forces of the world, people who would be powerful, they strike back against those who would remove them from their totalitarian or absolute control of power. I'm not saying that John the Baptist was a Luke Skywalker, but he was something similar in that he lived in an area, and his mindset was opposite from where the seat of power was. This is the point. He moved consciously further away from where the seat of power was. He performed a symbolic act of rejecting power - in this case Roman power. He didn't want to be part of a culture of oppression, or conform to the powerful needs of others. I think that idea can be uncomfortable, because most of us do conform even to what's wrong in society.

And then the second symbol that struck me on this feast is, he wore a garment of camel hair. This is elsewhere in the Gospel. And his food was locusts and wild honey. And that makes us uncomfortable, too, because he was anti-materialist. He associated himself by this action, I would suggest, with the dispossessed and those who lack luxuries. Would you want to do without? I'm not so sure I would. John's action wasn't just a sort of hippy thing, you know, "I'll just protest." It was in a context of where people were being dispossessed and pushed to the fringes of society by poverty. I'm not saying that his symbol of absolute poverty has got to be repeated literally, but it does pose the question, "Do we ally ourselves with the truly dispossessed, and those who are badly treated?"

And then the third thing, in the Gospel it says, "John told Herod, 'It is against the law for you to have your brother's wife.'" That's anti-populist or anti populist. John is not there to be popular. He is 'speaking truth to power.' He's attacking an establishment that is flouting not just a human law, but the moral law. We have different types of law in England. Double

yellow lines mean you shouldn't park here, but that's a human law for general common sense on the road. But also murder is against the law. There's quite a big difference. And the law that John was standing up for was the eternal law of the moral principles for a just and fair society, and the way we treat others. Society can pass laws but they do not always conform to what is of eternal value.

For example, the law might say you can have an abortion up to 24 weeks, but is that a just law, rational and sensible - especially when you think that if you kicked a woman in the stomach who was 23 weeks pregnant, and she had a miscarriage, you would be prosecuted for murder. There are obviously great inconsistencies in our human laws, versus the moral laws of God. This inconsistency affects our understanding of relationships and of rights and obligations. Today people have a great sense of rights. "It's my right." - but I don't see a corresponding sense of obligation, as in "It's my duty to do." John put more emphasis, by his lifestyle, on obligations, and that's countercultural. It's going against the flow of society.

A great example of counterculture is the reply of Jesus in Luke's Gospel, when all the people asked him, "What must we do then?" And he said, "If anyone has two tunics, he must share with the person who has none, and the one who has something to eat must do the same." To tax collectors, Jesus said, "Exact no more than your rate." To soldiers, "No intimidation, no extortion." However in our communities, in society, these moral norms can be bent a little to suit the circumstances. The police will tell you this - that people think it's okay to cheat a big organization because it's not really stealing, is it? If someone nicks something off the shelf in a supermarket they may think it's ok - the owners won't go bust. Another example we hear is "Well, I got this, it fell off the back of a lorry." We can accommodate ourselves to perks that we feel entitled - "Well, others do it, so I'll do it," God forbid, we can even be tempted to cheat on our tax returns. We tell ourselves that it's not stealing when it's so easy, and everybody else is doing it too. But it IS stealing.

And so it's very interesting that Jesus, and John the Baptist before Him, are once again, countercultural. Jesus says, don't copy what your fellow soldier, your fellow tax collector, in other words, your fellow workmate does. You should be countercultural. You should not go with Society's flow. These are all things, I think, that Jesus learnt at John's hands, but of course, the message of Jesus was even more dynamic.

And the fifth thought I gained from today's feast - you'll be pleased to know I've written another 15, [laughter] was John was a precursor. And by that, I mean, as we heard there in the Acts of the Apostles, in another form, "Jesus must increase, and I must decrease." That's the opposite of Self, of total self absorption, of 'Me.' There's nothing wrong with achievement, with ambition, with getting on and doing your best in work, but John is countercultural in the sense of he's doing the opposite of asserting self. His life shows us how not to become the centre of prominence at the expense of others. As a person, John pointed to something / 'Someone' greater than himself. John's lifestyle demonstrates that there's something above and beyond our achievements that is worth witnessing to. And I would say that we are now called to be a precursor, to point to the One who is important in our lives.

The last thought I've put down, which can make us all very uncomfortable, is John's celibacy. I think he was a great witness to celibacy. This is countercultural, renunciation of ordinary everyday life, ordinary everyday pleasures to make space for something greater. Sometimes, when I listen to eulogies at funerals, and it's said, he or she was a great family person, they loved their children and grandchildren, and would do anything for them, and I think, "So what?" There's a side of me that thinks, "So what?" You would love your own wouldn't you? ' But there is bigger issue - did you / do you love anyone else? Do I have children simply because it's the done thing, and then build a wall around my family, and ignore the wider needs of society.

I was talking to a lovely old person recently in the parish, 92, and I said, "Where have all the years gone?" And he said, "I never ask that question, Father. I ask, 'What did I do?'" Isn't that powerful answer? I was deeply moved when that person said, "What did I do? What did I contribute during my 92 years?" I think John, and this 92 year old man challenges us all. In the Gospels we hear people say of Jesus, what will this Child turn out to be? Now, that's a question we could ask of ourselves, isn't it?  
"What have I turned out to be?"



