

Trinity VII (Proper 10) 2018

Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream (Amos: 5:24)
The cost of being who God calls us to be.

I remember as a child being fascinated by a small object in the Royal Institution of Cornwall in Truro – the county museum. Found in a field in the 19th century, it was a small medieval piece of goldsmiths' work in the form of John the Baptist's head on a platter. A little lever behind moved the eyes – rather gory, but rather appealing to children!

Today we have just heard the unedifying account of the death of John the Baptist – a PG story if there ever was one! A terrible story about jealousy, desire and control. So why this story today? If you were here last week, you will remember that Jesus returned to his home town of Nazareth, only to be rejected by his own people, a response that amazed him. However, the urgency of the Gospel message is made clear when he moves to other villages and then commissions and sends out of the twelve to proclaim the Good News. This they do, calling for repentance – turning Godward - healing and anointing as a sign of God's love.

Then – *bang*- Mark immediately takes us to the murky world of politics, power and sensuality with the account of John the Baptist's death. It is almost as if we have turned over two pages at once. However, I think that Mark uses these shock tactics and sequencing to draw us to understand the underlying message within this part of the Gospel. We are meant to feel discomfort.

The emphasis in most of chapter 6 is mission – proclaiming of the Good News of the Kingdom, together with a sense of the opposition which might arise within our Gospel call. Jesus experienced relative failure in his home territory. The local boy finds it tough going – *'he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them'* - hardly a ringing endorsement of God's power made known in the Messiahship of Jesus, is it! As I said, the Messiahship of Jesus is utterly different to that expected by people. They are not drawn into this new way of life by astonishing deeds of power like one of these heroes in the modern super hero films which so dismay me (and people know that I like a good disaster movie)! Instead we have Jesus, quietly revealing the healing power of God open to all, and it is as well to note that in every case, the miracle accounts are relational. Jesus quietly draws those concerned into healing and new life through interacting with them. Even the accounts of the deeds of power like the calming of the storm and walking on water are actually to do with faith – shaky old faith, together with **our** acceptance of Jesus as God's Son – that we can grasp within our humanity the unknowable Love of God seen in the face of Jesus. This is the journey which the Gospel writers are leading us on.

True conversion is not to do with amazement at deeds and wonders. The Gospel writers call us to see that these signs of the beauty of God's Love are do with faith and relationship, and that **our** faith is about journeying with him and knowing that he walks with each of us in every aspect of our lives and seeks to lead us further in the knowledge of God's Love for us.

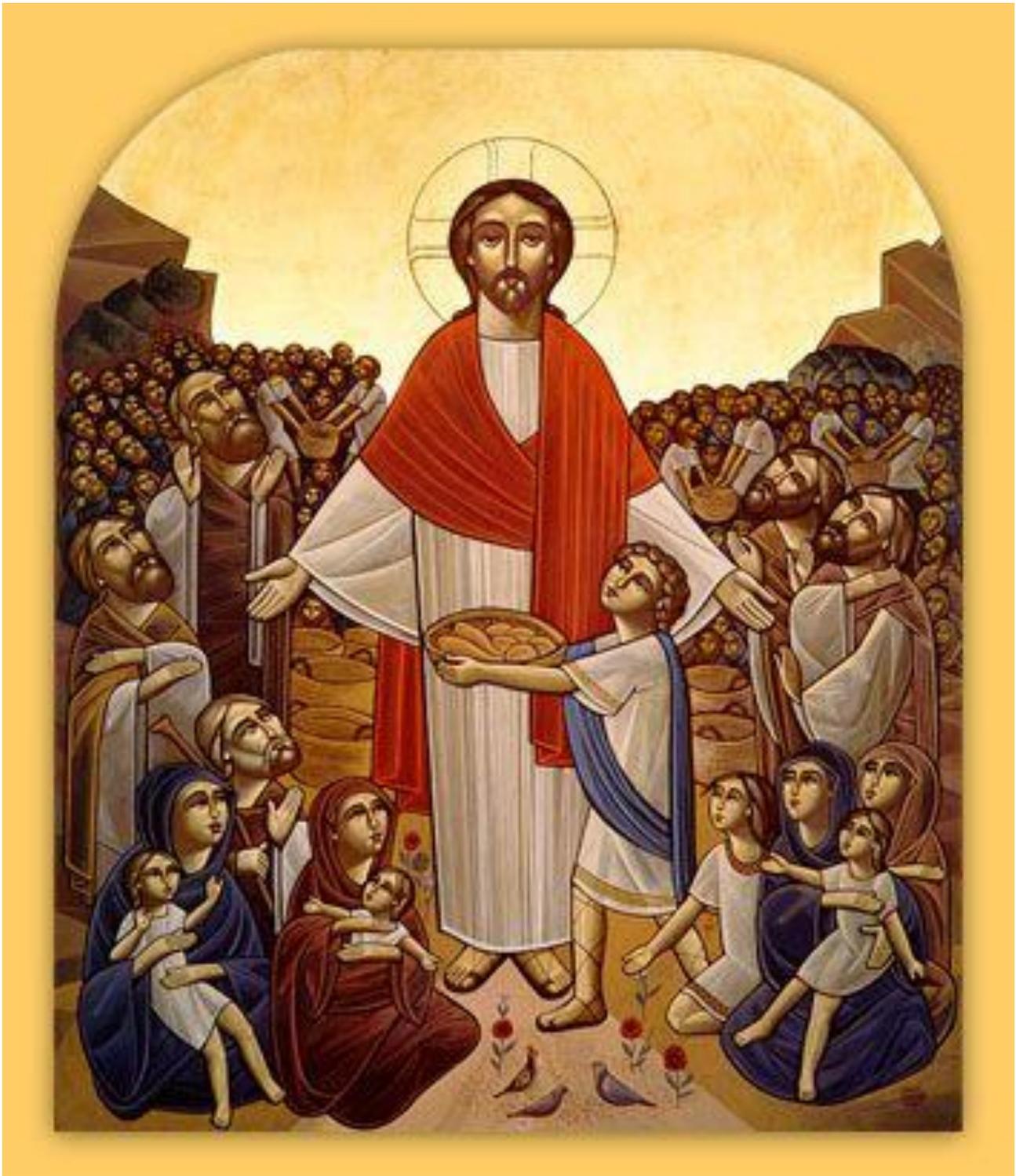
And this leads us back to John. As I said, I think that one of the reasons Mark gives us this account of John's death to point out to us what the cost of discipleship can actually mean. However, when we celebrated the Nativity of John a few weeks ago, I mentioned two attributes of John which I believe are part of our own faith journey. One, prophecy, might seem outside our comfort zones, but it is far from being Mystic Megs or Russell Grants gazing into crystal balls. It is to proclaim that through faith we look towards the building of the Kingdom of God for humanity – we pray it every day - *'Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth,'* What we seek to do through faith is, in the words of Amos, is to help reveal *'justice rolling down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.'* (Amos 5: 24).

But for John and for ourselves, prophecy does not stand on its own. It is inextricably linked to pointing away from ourselves towards Jesus – *Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.* We are signs of the one who gives himself for all people, the one who can lead all to the fullness of life itself, because we are bound up in his Resurrection. This knowledge should be transformational for each of us. Yes, we can have doubts, but even John had those when Jesus turned out to be utterly different from the Messiah he was expecting. Even the Lord himself struggled in the Garden of Gethsemane before praying to the Father, *'yet no what I want, but what you want.'* - the self-giving love of God revealed through death and resurrection.

I want to set you a task this week. Take away the readings sheet and read through the passage from Ephesians. Although it is punctuated, in the original Greek it is the longest single sentence in the New Testament. It is scripture at its most radiant, and it is addressed to each of us. The terminology is of its kind, but don't be bogged down by that. Just look beyond and see the glory of life Jesus draws us into at every step of our journey – the knowledge that in the good times and the bad, we have the knowledge of such love which passes our understanding. John's terrible end was no end at all, but a doorway to the further journey into the heart of God's love.

As I said, the whole section of the Gospel at this point is about mission. The apostles are sent out. We then have the account of the cost mission can have with this terrible story of John's end. This moves to the apostles return. They – as you and I might be, feel harried by crowds who want to interact with Jesus. They can't escape. But Jesus again reveals relational love as he views the crowd with compassion – and 5000 are fed by the one who is the Bread of Life.

We too gather around the altar to be fed Sunday by Sunday and strengthened, are then commissioned and sent forth into the world as prophets of justice and mercy - pointers to revealing the fulness of life open to all in the face of Jesus Christ.



Modern Coptic Icon of the Multiplication of the Loaves

Amos 7:7-15

⁷ This is what he showed me: The Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb-line, with a plumb-line in his hand. ⁸ And the Lord said to me, 'Amos, what do you see?' And I said, 'A plumb-line.' Then the Lord said,

'See, I am setting a plumb-line
in the midst of my people Israel;
I will never again pass them by;

⁹ the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate,

and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste,
and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.'

Amaziah Complains to the King

¹⁰ Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, 'Amos has conspired against you in the very centre of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. ¹¹ For thus Amos has said,

"Jeroboam shall die by the sword,
and Israel must go into exile
away from his land."

¹² And Amaziah said to Amos, 'O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; ¹³ but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.'

¹⁴ Then Amos answered Amaziah, 'I am^[a] no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am^[b] a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, ¹⁵ and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, "Go, prophesy to my people Israel."

Ephesians 1: 3-14

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴ just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. ⁵ He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸ that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight ⁹ he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. ¹¹ In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, ¹² so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. ¹³ In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; ¹⁴ this is the pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

Mark 6: 14-29

¹⁴ King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were^[b] saying, 'John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.' ¹⁵ But others said, 'It is Elijah.' And others said, 'It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.' ¹⁶ But when Herod heard of it, he said, 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.'

¹⁷ For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod^[c] had married her. ¹⁸ For John had been telling Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.' ¹⁹ And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, ²⁰ for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed;^[d] and yet he liked to listen to him. ²¹ But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. ²² When his daughter Herodias^[e] came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, 'Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.' ²³ And he solemnly swore to her, 'Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.' ²⁴ She went out and said to her mother, 'What should I ask for?' She replied, 'The head of John the baptizer.' ²⁵ Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, 'I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.'

²⁶ The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. ²⁷ Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's^[f] head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, ²⁸ brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. ²⁹ When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb