

The early Church had its worries about John the Baptist. he was a charismatic and very popular figure. Mark in the opening verses of his Gospel tells us that all Jerusalem came to John to be baptised. That must be an exaggeration but the crowds that came to John were numerous. Josephus, the Jewish historian who wrote towards the end of the first century says that Herod Antipas had John arrested and killed as a sort of pre-emptive strike because he feared the crowds who followed John might cause a revolt. Then as now tyrants fear mass protests.

The early Church was not concerned with the number of John's followers. It was troubled by the fact that some of them continued to think that John the Baptist was the Messiah. Jesus being only his foremost disciple. It is easy to see why John's followers could come to this conclusion.

John broke the silence. No prophetic voice had been heard in the land for five hundred years. Then John appeared in the wilderness, looking like Elijah and sounding like a prophet. His voice woke the carpenter in far away Nazareth from his years of silence and he made his way to the banks of the Jordan to seek out John. There Jesus submitted to John's baptism. Now who is greater the one who baptises or the one who is baptised? It looked as if John was the master and Jesus was the pupil.

Moreover John's baptism was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. It appears that Jesus was in need of forgiveness. That he was not 'one like us in all things but sin' as the Church announced.

Read the accounts of Jesus' baptism and the embarrassment of the evangelists is clearly apparent. Matthew invents a conversation in which John is reluctant to baptise saying it should be the other way about. Reading Luke you'd think John wasn't there when Jesus is baptised. John gives no description of the baptism itself just John's report of the wonders that he saw.

John worried the early Church. But there was nothing they could do about it. They couldn't air-brush John out of the story. He was a fixed and immovable part of it.

Remember early on in the Acts of the Apostles, a replacement is sought for Judas. Peter gives a little speech, telling the voters what they must look for in a candidate for the post. In the job description is the need to have been with us all the time Jesus went about with us 'beginning with the baptism of John until he was taken up with us'. So some of Jesus' disciples were, at the beginning, part of the Baptist's group. This is what we hear in the fourth Gospel though it is very different from the story told in the other three Gospels.

John's role in the development of Jesus' self understanding and mission is

underplayed in the Gospels, but traces of that role can be found. John was a vital figure in Jesus' vocation. Most of us will remember with great affection some teacher at school or tutor at College whom we respected deeply; probably because they treated us well, seemed to have hope in us. Such was the relationship of Jesus and John.

After John's arrest when Jesus begins his own ministry people think he is John come back. The pupil is mistaken for his teacher. Praise in that for both. Eventually Jesus will develop his own style. He will move around, visiting towns and villages. John had to bear flowing water. Jesus' ministry of teaching, especially in parables, and healing and exorcising demons and disputing with the leaders of the people will be very different to that of John. His message of love and forgiveness will be different to John's violent, apocalyptic warnings. But at the beginning John was the Lord's much respected mentor.

Jesus will later say of John, 'Of all those born of a woman none is greater than John'. There can be no higher praise. Jesus says of John exactly what we would say about Jesus - he is the greatest person who has ever lived. Jesus held John in that highest regard.

And John's death at the hands of self-interested power was the clearest signal of Jesus' own fate.

The early Church had its problems with John. There was a fear that John would eclipse the Lord. Jesus had no such difficulties. The Church was seeing problems where there really were none. When we give people their due, when we appreciate a person's gifts and talents, when we respect them for what they are, there is benefit for all.

In today's Gospel John looks towards someone coming after him, a stronger one who will baptise in a more powerful way than he can. John defers to Jesus and Jesus will defer to John. A vivid example of how we should treat one another if we are to follow in the footsteps of them both.