

Sunday 24th June 2018
Birth of John the Baptist (B)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Isaiah 40.1-11
NT: Galatians 3.23-end
G: Luke 1.57-66,80

In AD 33, God opened a door; a door to real life; a door to eternal life; that door is Jesus Christ. Around 33 years earlier, John the Baptist was born. Then, in AD 1980, I was born, and, in August of that year, I was baptized at All Hallows Parish Church in Liverpool. But what did it mean? What happened when I was baptized? What was the significance of this moment for my life? I was not from a churchgoing family; in fact, my maternal Grandfather, when discussing the fact of my baptism with me as a child, said that he wasn't sure if there was a God, but I'd been baptized so that, if there was, my name would be 'on the list'. Nevertheless, the fact that I was baptized was always important to me, it was something that mattered, it was part of my identity, albeit I was never certain why I felt like this. It was a bit like being left in a queue outside the door to eternal life: I could see the door, I knew it was there, and I even understood that it was open, but I didn't go through it, I didn't respond to the fact of my being baptized; instead, I waited. As I grew older, I sometimes thought about the door, oftentimes, I didn't; sometimes, I wondered if I would go through it; sometimes, I behaved belligerently, insisting I would never go through it; sometimes, I questioned whether the door was open – and even whether the door was there at all. But it was there; and it was open; but, still, I didn't go through it.

This situation remained the same until AD 2008: me, waiting outside the open door, the door to real life, the door to eternal life, the door that is Jesus Christ, but not going through it; then, in that year, something began to change. I began to hear and listen to God, to feel and understand the presence of the Holy Spirit in my life, in the world, in creation; and I wanted to know more about Jesus: I wanted to go through the open door. Things began to clarify for me; I started to develop and acquire language for things that I knew but hadn't been able to articulate; I started to better

comprehend concepts with which I was familiar, but hadn't fully understood; and things became apparent to me that I hadn't hitherto realised. For one thing, I realised that there wasn't a queue to go through the door at all, I didn't have to wait; but now I questioned whether I was allowed to go through the door. And I was frightened; I was frightened about what all of this meant for me and for those I love, about what might happen if I went through the door, about what would be on the other side of the door. What would it mean to go to church? What would it mean to become part of a church community? Would I be accepted or rejected? And, if I was accepted, what would that mean? What does it mean to be part of the Body of Christ? For Saint Paul, baptism means clothing ourselves with Christ – it is a gateway to a new unity in the Body of Christ, a unity that transcends human social and cultural distinctions. Well, fine – but what was I going to tell my parents? Being baptized was one thing – after all, that decision was made for me by my family – but responding to this by actually going to church, by becoming a worshipping Christian? What would they think about that?

So, I carried on waiting outside of the open door, the door to real life, the door to eternal life, the door that is Jesus Christ; but now it felt like I was waiting for something that was going to happen, that I was going to go through the door – but I wasn't sure when, as if I was waiting for someone to tell me that it was ok to go through it, as if I needed permission to go through. Then, in AD 2012, I met a priest who told me that I was free to go through the door whenever I wanted to, that I didn't need permission; so, I started going to church. And in June 2013, almost 33 years after I was baptized, I was confirmed, affirming the fact of my baptism, embracing it, fully accepting it – and accepting that I now wanted to begin to understand what it meant, to understand what had happened at the moment of my baptism, to begin to both appreciate and articulate its significance. A week after my confirmation, I took Holy Communion for the first time – and perhaps this was the moment I realised that I was going through the door. And I realised something else: that this wasn't the end, the culmination of a process, something achieved, the end of a journey; I realised

that this was the beginning, that walking through the open door into real life, into eternal life, was the start of the journey; that God's opening of this door, the door that is Jesus Christ, is something new. Indeed, it seems that I had actually been going through the door all of the time, even when it felt like I was waiting outside; and I realised that Jesus had always been with me, even when that opened door had seemed distant – that when I was still far off, God met me in His Son and brought me home; and I feel as if I am still going through the door.

John the Baptist had a crucial role to play in God's work opening this door, preparing the way of the LORD, pointing people to the opening of the door, making straight the path that leads towards the door, pointing people towards Jesus. Yet it is the power of God's Holy Spirit that opens the door that is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as it opens the mouth of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. And this opening is a new thing: Zechariah and Elizabeth's son is expected to be named after his father; but, in obeying the call of God through the Angel Gabriel and naming him John, a door is opened to the new, to freedom, to life, for Zechariah and Elizabeth, for John, for the world. And the sign that points to this opening is the freeing of Zechariah's tongue, just as, later, John's baptising of Jesus opens the door for another sign: the Holy Spirit descending and resting on Christ, a sign to the world that God is opening the door of salvation for all. Baptism is a sign that God has turned to us in Jesus Christ, and we are called to turn to Him, to turn, then, and live; and we are called to point others towards Jesus, towards life.

I feel like I grew into my baptism, that it was the opening of my consciousness of the open door that is Jesus Christ, the door that I would go through in becoming part of a church community, in worship, in confirmation and in receiving the sacrament of Holy Communion – the door that I was always going through, that I am still going through. And I want to point others towards that open door, to tell them that they can go through it anytime, that it is the beginning, the beginning of real life, of eternal life – and to tell them that it is a door that we go through together, a journey that we all take together, as we live together in a new unity as the Body of Christ, through Christ, and

in Christ. Baptism is one of the sacraments of the Church, which means that it is a sign, a sign of God's grace, a visible, physical symbol of God's love for us; baptism is a beginning, the start of a journey with God which continues for the rest of our lives, the first step in our response to God's love; baptism is an act of witness, and a call to witness, just as John the Baptist witnessed and called others to witness, pointing the world towards Jesus. Sharing our faith with others can sometimes seem a challenging prospect, but it is always transformative. And, in my experience, people always want to talk about God – indeed, people are always talking about God, even if they don't, at first, realise it – in the words of Psalm 42: 'My soul is athirst for God, even for the living God.' The world is thirsty for God, reaching out as God reaches to us in Jesus Christ. Those who have been baptized are given a lighted candle, a picture of the light of Christ conquering the darkness of death, because everyone who is baptized walks in that light for the rest of their lives; and as John the Baptist was called, we too are called to witness to this light, in our baptism, and in our lives as Christians. Amen.

Louis Johnson