# "THE FORERUNNER"

***Matthew 3:1-12***

So, how's the preparation coming along? Are you all ready for Christmas? It's just nine days away and I'm sure there are people here at every point on the spectrum of preparedness. Some of you have sent all their cards. Some of you have sent none. Some of you have wrapped all the presents. Some of you have still to get them. It's funny, isn't it? Christmas is on the same day every year – one of the few things we can really rely on – and yet it still seems to take most of us by surprise.

We're well into Advent now – the final week – and should be preparing ourselves for Christmas, for the arrival of Jesus. It's the time of year when many people suddenly start spraying the whole occasion with a religious veneer: carol singing, the annual trip to church, cards with religious pictures on them, the odd charitable act or gift. In whatever terms we see it and however well we understand it, at root this is the time of year for announcing the coming of Jesus Christ.

And that's just what John the Baptist was doing in the short extract we just read from Matthew's story of Jesus' life. He was announcing the arrival of Jesus. Maybe the words he was using and the general attitude he seems to have had to authority are not what we might have recommended – look at *vv7-10*, for example – but he was certainly getting the message across. As he preached about God and his relationship with humankind, as he baptised those who were wanting to demonstrate their response to God's word, so he also told the crowds that someone even greater would be along in a short while.

There's no doubting John's sincerity, or his effectiveness, or his popularity. We read elsewhere in the Gospels about his preaching to the King and about his credibility amongst the people. He was really changing lives with his preaching and his prophesying. But the heart of his message was that they should prepare for someone who was going to go way beyond anything he could do. John was almost like a warm-up act for the superstar who was at the top of the bill.

And this person who was going to follow him, this Messiah who had been so long awaited, this Jesus who would transform their lives and their world, was a powerful and awesome figure. John's own words make that clear – *"After me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry."* Of course, the people had not yet had the opportunity to see this man, nor to experience the amazing power of his words and his actions. But we know, don't we? We've read to the end of the book.

This man was going to turn the society of his day upside down with his uncompromising talk of the Kingdom of God. Jesus was able to heal the lame and the lepers, the sick and the psychopaths. He drove

out the forces of evil as demons rushed screaming from the bodies of those they had afflicted. He spoke peace in the storm and in the synagogue. He spoke judgement on the hillsides and in the Temple courts. He sat with the rich at their tables and with the poor in their hovels. He touched the lives of men and women, children and adults. He brought hope and health and *shalom* to all who wanted to take his message seriously. He sat bleeding in the dungeon in Jerusalem and stood blazing with glory on the mountain. He made no bones about the commitment needed to follow his teachings – and he demonstrated in his own life where that could lead as he was executed naked and humiliated on a rough wooden cross. But then he burst from the hole in the rock to blaze a trail beyond the grave that would give everyone a chance to overcome death if they wanted to. This was indeed an awesome and powerful figure to whom John was pointing.

And as he came striding across the Galilean landscape, he came promising his Holy Spirit to all who would accept his lordship. John had been baptising people with water – a symbolic means of attesting to their desire to reform. Jesus would come baptising in the Holy Spirit, giving men and women the opportunity to tap into the power with which he himself was filled. He wasn't simply going to persuade people to live differently, to reassess their priorities, to follow his agenda. He was going to fill them to the brim with the power to do something about it, to lead their lives according to a completely different set of values. Those who followed Jesus would not simply have an outward means of witnessing to their allegiance to him: they would have inner strength and inner resolve to follow where Jesus led. It would not be the external witness of water dripping from their bodies, but the glow of holy fire about their characters.

And this was not just because of a vague general desire to be good, to live better lives, to help one another. This was because it was a matter of life and death – eternal life and death. John uses the vocabulary of judgement as he talks of winnowing and threshing and unquenchable fire. This is serious stuff and those who listened to John – and eventually to Jesus – were going to have to think very hard about what they were doing. There was something beyond this life, something more than the here and now, something more than sticking to the right sets of rules. God was holding people accountable for their choices and their decisions. There were going to be consequences for the people's response to Jesus. Their acceptance or rejection of what he came to teach and to demonstrate actually mattered.

But this announcement that Jesus was coming, this opportunity to prepare for his arrival was not like the announcements of the angels to Mary and to Joseph and to the shepherds, nor the message of the star that the Asian astrologers followed to the Bethlehem stable. Jesus was already there. He had been on the earth as God in human form for the best part of thirty years. He was there alright. It was just that his presence had yet to be felt. He had yet to have an impact on the lives of those who listened to John.

Jesus is already here. We talk about preparing to welcome him at Christmas time, but he is here. He is among us. He doesn't just turn up in December and then disappear so that we can get on with what we want to do for the rest of the year. If he just turned up in December, if all that we experienced of him was as the baby in the Bethlehem manger, then it would be great. A tame God whom we could coo over and celebrate with nice words and soppy sentimentality. A God that could be put away with the Christmas tree lights and the posh cutlery a few days after our annual orgies of consumerism and gluttony. But we can't do that. Jesus won't be put away and subjected to our whims and wishes.

The trouble is, that's what we've allowed Jesus to become. He is our disposable deity, our little Christmas baby who never grows up and never really gets to make a difference to us. He's our "God of choice". Ben Elton's novel *Dead Famous* is set around a *Big Brother* type reality television show. In the course of the show, called *House Arrest*, one of the contestants is murdered on the set. Despite the 24 hour cameras and microphones, it's not clear who has done it. The police are called in and the officer in charge of the investigation, Inspector Coleridge, is a committed Christian (whom Elton portrays relatively sympathetically). Towards the end of the book, the remaining contestants are discussing religion when this exchange takes place and this is the way Coleridge responds to the words of Dervla, an Irish contestant who is portrayed as a bit New Agey.

> "So do you believe in him, then?"
> "Well, not *him*. Not an old man with a big beard sitting in a cloud chucking thunderbolts about the place. I suppose I believe in *something*, but I don't hold with any organised religion. I don't need some rigid set of rules and regulations to commune with the God of my choice. God should be there for you whether you've read his book or not."
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> Coleridge and Trisha [one of the constables on the team] had caught this conversation on the net. The *House Arrest* web cast played constantly in the incident room now.
> "I should have arrested that girl for obstruction," he said. [Dervla had lied when questioned earlier.] "There's one young lady who could do with a few *more* rules and regulations."
> "What's she done now?" said Trisha. "I thought you liked her"
> "For heaven's sake, Patricia, did you hear her? 'The God of my choice.' What kind of flabby nonsense is that?
> "I agreed with her, actually."
> "Well then, you're a silly and as lazy as she is! You don't *choose* god, Patricia. The Almighty is not a matter of whim! God is not required to *be there for you*! You should *be there for him*!"
> "Well, that's what you think, sir, but – "
> "It is also what every single philosopher and seeker after truth in every culture has believed since the dawn of time, constable! It has always been commonly supposed that faith requires some element of humility on the part of the worshipper. Some sense of awe in the smallness of oneself and the vastness of creation! Yours is a generation that sees God as some kind of vague counsellor! There to tell you what you want to hear, when you want to hear it, and to be entirely forgotten about in between times. You have invented a junk faith and you ask it to justify your junk culture!"

(*Dead Famous* by Ben Elton p337 Black Swan Books © Bantam Press 2001)

You see, if we just think of Advent and Christmas as a time to prepare for little baby Jesus, the gurgling infant who lies there as an excuse to be nice to each other for a couple of days a year, if that is our God of choice, then we can just put him away and ignore the fact that he is already here. But he is already at work. He is awesome and powerful. He comes offering us his Holy Spirit. He reminds us that there are consequences – eternal consequences – to our words and actions.

Now, if you know all that – if you have responded to Jesus and you do acknowledge him as Lord – then Christmas can be celebrated as the time when God did send us his most awesome gift and through him changed the world for ever. But if you haven't acknowledged that, then Christmas is just another empty festival, another Bank Holiday which means nothing and leads nowhere. How do you respond? What – or whom – are you really preparing for during this Advent season?