

## JOHN THE MESSIAH?

(LUKE 3:10-18)



Statue of St John the Baptist with golden cross, Charles Bridge, Prague, Czech Republic

### Our Gospel passage today centres on John the Baptist and considers two questions.

The first is this: What does baptism mean for those people who have responded positively to his preaching? For Luke, this centres on the use of possessions. A major theme in Luke's Gospel is the care for the poor which features strongly in the preaching of the prophets. To be converted to God means to give up selfish attitudes and behaviour and to consider the needs of those less fortunate. It means resisting the temptation to use a position of authority and power, such as that enjoyed by tax officials and soldiers, to enrich oneself at the expense of those in a vulnerable situation.

The second question is: Who is the Messiah? It is clear from this passage and elsewhere that some people thought that John the Baptist fulfilled this role, and later Christian missionaries encountered disciples of John in Ephesus. John here declares himself not to be the Messiah and looks forward to the coming of the Stronger One, who will bring judgment and salvation. It is John's mission to prepare a people for the Lord, and once Jesus has arrived on the scene and been baptised himself, John's ministry is over. ■

### REFLECT

**T**he Gospel tradition tells us that John the Baptist was imprisoned and then executed by Herod Antipas. Most people are familiar with the rather dramatic and colourful account of his fate as a result of Herod's rash promise to his step-daughter Salome. Even John's being imprisoned for denouncing Herod's legally incestuous marriage to Herodias seems a somewhat extreme reaction to an irritating fundamentalist preacher.

However, our Gospel passage today gives us a clue that Herod may well have regarded John as a real and present

danger to his own power and position. John was a person who was gaining influence, not just over the ordinary religious-minded citizens but also over those officials on whom Herod's rule depended, the tax-collectors and soldiers. Herod was also a puppet ruler who depended on the favour of the Roman authorities, so any threat to Roman rule had to be dealt with immediately and severely. If John the Baptist was becoming someone with sway over the likes of soldiers, then he would be an alternative centre of power in the land. It is therefore possible that this was the reason for his imprisonment and subsequent execution. We remember that

### LEARN

Tax-collectors did not receive a salary: they were expected to charge commission on the money they gathered for the Roman authorities.

The Herod who appears in the story of John the Baptist is Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great who ruled when Jesus was born.

Luke is particularly concerned with the plight of poor and vulnerable people.

The third Sunday of Advent is known as Laetare Sunday: *Laetare* (Rejoice!) is the opening Latin word of the entrance antiphon – we are halfway through Advent!

### DO

Look through your cupboards: is there any spare clothing or food you could give to the St Vincent de Paul Society or some such organisation for people in need?



### SAY

**Rejoice in the Lord always.**

Jesus was executed on a political charge as 'King of the Jews', not 'Son of God'.

On a more positive note, we can see in the tax-collectors and soldiers the universal offer of salvation: we will encounter these groups later in the ministry of Jesus, where associating with the despised tax-collectors will get Jesus into trouble. The Gentile centurion will beg Jesus to heal his servant, and it will be a Roman centurion who will declare the crucified Jesus righteous. As we move through Advent, we can see how God offers the Good News to everyone, irrespective of race, religion or occupation. ■