

# CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

|           |  |
|-----------|--|
| Date:     | 7 December 2025                          |
| Service:  | Eucharist, Second Sunday of Advent       |
| Preacher: | The Dean, The Very Revd Dr Edward Dowler |

In today's gospel we begin to engage with a key figure of the Advent season: John the Baptist, Jesus's cousin and forerunner. Living a wild existence by the River Jordan and calling his hearers sternly to repentance, John prepares the way for Jesus. And so he is prominent in this holy time of waiting and preparation as we too prepare ourselves to celebrate the Lord's birth and look forward to his coming at the end of time.

In a sermon preached 1600 or so years ago, a north African bishop looked at the way human beings communicate with one another and found in it an analogy of the way that John the Baptist relates to Jesus.

Let's imagine, says St Augustine of Hippo, that you have a friend who has something really important to tell you: a piece of significant news or a secret that has long been hidden away. He or she takes you out to a café or a restaurant and talks to you in urgent tones about whatever it is. Eventually you part from one another and in the evening you sit by yourself at home trying to digest the news. Your friend has stopped speaking. You don't hear his or her voice any longer but the message, the thing they told you: that is implanted in your heart and it will always remain there. The voice has passed away but the word – the message – still remains.

For Augustine, reading passages such as today's gospel reading, John the Baptist is the voice. He is the one who cries aloud in the wilderness. And John bears witness to Jesus who is described in John's gospel as the Word: God's himself to us. This works in Latin – the language in which Augustine was preaching – because the two words alliterate with one another: the word for voice is vox and the word for Word is Verbum. So John is the vox and Jesus is the verbum. John is the voice and Jesus is the Word which that voice communicates.

The heart of Augustine's comparison between John and Jesus; vox and verbum is this. John is the voice who cries aloud in the wilderness with the message of the coming messiah: God's anointed one. But eventually his voice – like all voices – falls silent. But he has communicated Jesus. Jesus, the Father's eternal Word. John the voice is temporary but Jesus the word is eternal.

And this comparison between that which is passing away and that which is eternal is John the Baptist's own message. He consistently proclaims that Jesus is much greater than he is: he is not worthy to untie his sandals. I love the representation of John in an altarpiece originally designed for a church in Issenheim in Germany. In it, John is shown with an enormous, almost distended forefinger with which he uses to point towards Jesus. John tells his hearers 'I am not the Christ' and that 'He – Jesus – must increase but I must decrease'. At the end of the day, John is just a voice: certainly a very powerful one, but ultimately just a voice: raised for a while to cry out in the wilderness, but eventually passing away. But Jesus is the Word of the Lord to whom that voice bears witness and which endures for ever. Augustine says 'John was a voice, but the Lord in the beginning was the Word. John was a voice for a time, Christ the eternal Word in the beginning'.

Before he was converted to Christianity, Augustine had been a university teacher in the cities of Carthage, Rome and Milan. His subject was Rhetoric – the study of public speaking. He would teach his students how to speak, how to use their voices in ways that would please and persuade their listeners. After his conversion to Christianity, he looked askance at his former career: it had been about empty verbal tricks: about a whole lot of human verbiage that ultimately didn't amount to much compared with the absolute truth that he had found in Christ. There were a lot of voices raised, a lot of human words with a small 'w'. But they had meant nothing in comparison with the reality and the solidity of God's eternal Word.

In western society in the twenty first century, we are no strangers to the power of the voice. We constantly hear raised and clamorous voices, arguing passionately this way and that in an ever-increasing variety of media. And while human voices of course have their importance, the Church in this holy season waits not for voices that are passing away, but for the revealing of the Father's eternal Word. We wait for the one whose permanence and changelessness will ultimately absorb all the chatter and noise that seem to loom so large in current controversies.

And yet, Augustine teaches that John the voice was needed in order to proclaim the message. Although the voice was passing away, the story couldn't

have happened without him. Jesus the Word needed John the voice to prepare the way for him, and Jesus also needs our voices to be raised for him in this Advent season. Raised for him in worship, prayer and song as we sing and hear the wonderful hymns and anthems that this time of year brings us. Raised for him in witness that this season is about the coming of the Lord, and not just about the birth of a cute little baby, or indeed consumer spending. Raised for him as we perhaps invite friends and family members to come with us to services over Christmas; to help them find the living Word of God whom we have found and who at the first Christmas came to find us. The voice passes away and yet it has a crucial role: to bear witness to Jesus, the ever-living Word who came into the world for us, and to implant him into our hearts.