

St. John the Baptist Wakerley.

Patronal Festival, 18 June 2017.

Last Year.

We met for the first time, exactly a year ago when I was Licenced as your priest by the bishop in Barrowden Church. It has been a delightful encounter so far and I am grateful to you all for your patience, humour and enthusiasm in the gospel. Just 24 hours after The Licencing we met again, here in this peaceful and holy space. It is a powerful and a healing space and serves its purpose well in the life of the Benefice and in the region. Rutland folk – and those further afield – come here because it is set apart and continues to engender that atmosphere of peace, healing and reconciliation so difficult to find in a busier situation.

Just a year ago we thought about the marginalization of Wakerley and John the Baptist. He ministered in the desert. He was a peripheral person. People were attracted to go and hear what he had to say for he was something of an extremist. This village continues to be isolated. It has been cut off from Barrowden by the bridge closure and another one is threatened. It reminds me of the famous headline in *The Times* in the 1930's, "Fog in the Channel; Continent cut off." Today it would make a fitting motto for the Brexiteers for such isolation enhances rather than demeans.

Election Results.

These last few weeks have been very difficult for us as a country. It is at times like this that we tend to withdraw – at least mentally – into a safe place: our families, our communities, this place of calm. Outside the battle seems to rage. Apart from appalling acts of terror, the election and now the Grenfell Tower disaster has unleashed a torrent of blame, extreme language and binary division which cannot just be attributed to the passing passions of election night. There is something more lasting here, more insidious.

We are in danger of forgetting the varieties of colour and shade that exist between us: the value of difference. We need only to reflect on one of the basic images of our church as The Body of Christ. We cannot all be hands or feet. If we were, then who would do the thinking and the speaking? St. Paul majors on this point in his letter to the belligerent Corinthian Church: "*The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you', nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you'.*" (1 Cor. 12.21). This is the way of families. Some members can annoy us intensely but they are still family members; they remain on the Christmas Card list.

I remember well an extremely annoying member of the Organ Appeal Committee in my last parish. I was keen to ditch him but a wise friend told me to hesitate. Difference is essential and should be honoured. None of us can see the whole truth. The other person will have something to offer. It is important that we identify that Spirit of God in our colleagues, friends and neighbours.

John Baptist.

Which brings me to John the Baptist. He was a misfit – a really difficult and awkward fellow. He lived in isolation, in the desert; he dressed and ate like a primitive animal and his teaching – which attracted many hearers – was blunt, direct, uncompromising. I guess that John the Baptist had many hearers but few friends. You will remember that he was beheaded because he was fearless about confronting King Herod with his immoral court proceedings.

Such characters make excellent prophets but poor leaders. A prophet is one who tells us what the message of God might be in a particular situation. Such messages are often uncomfortable.

Prophets disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed. These characters are alive and well in our society today and some of them attract great notoriety. We might name Tim Farron, the recent leader of the Liberal Democrats as one of the latest prophets. He resigned because he couldn't reconcile his Christian faith with the ideals of the party he was leading. His colleagues could not accept that difference and Farron wasn't prepared to compromise on the gospel as he read it. His resignation has brought him more admiration than his leadership of the party.

Another example would be the *'Chariots of Fire'* athlete Eric Liddle who – because of his Christian commitment - refused to run on a Sunday and was roundly condemned until – with some shifting around of the events – he won an unexpected victory in the 400 metres at the Paris Games in 1924. Yet another recent example is the way that my recent colleague Philip North, Bishop of Burnley, was treated by illiberal liberals when he was presented as the new Bishop of Sheffield.

"Prepare ye the way of the Lord" (Mt.3.3) was John the Baptist's rallying cry. The extreme stance which he took to defend the gospel allowed others to draw close to the living God. It is the same for us today. Such uncompromising positions often make us think seriously about our own faith or lack of it and encourage us to take a step closer to a commitment to Christ.

Amen.