



## On your marks

The focus for this all-age Advent service is the ministry of John the Baptist and how we, like John, can help people today to get ready to meet with Jesus.

John the Baptist and his work are a traditional focus for the second Sunday of Advent, as part of the four weeks of getting ready to encounter the Christmas miracle afresh. John's preaching, however, could assume many things that are not true today, such as: a strong religious mindset among the people; an awareness of Old Testament scriptures; a shared understanding of the symbolism of baptism; and a general longing for a Messiah. The challenge for us is to discover what there is already out there today, on which we might build in a similar way, so that people can be ready to meet Jesus in our generation. There are some clues in the story.

## Get set

The Bible reading is Luke 3:2-18.

[See also Mark 1:2-8; Matthew 3:1-12; John 1:19-28. Mark's version is the shortest and focuses on the physical appearance of John and what he did. Matthew quotes Isaiah briefly, describes John and then focuses on the hypocrisy of the religious leaders who came to meet him. John's version focuses on the dialogue between John and the religious leaders. Luke's gospel, however, focuses on a much longer quote from Isaiah and gives us far more about what John actually said to the different groups in the crowd, spelling out what repentance means in terms of a new attitude of love to others. The following outline uses Luke's version.]

A key verse about John: *'John himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world'* (John 1:8-9, TNIV).

You will need: a set of objects as clues to John (see 2 below); a 1000-piece jigsaw; four slightly larger jigsaw corner pieces with key words on (see 8 below).

## Go!

- 1 After a general welcome, play the piece 'Prepare ye the way of the Lord' from *Godspell*.
- 2 Introduce the theme in an interesting way by producing a series of visual aids as clues to the identity of John. They could include some of the following:
  - **A pair of sandals** (John said he was not worthy to stoop down and undo the sandals of the Messiah)
  - **A toy lamb** (this was John's code description for Jesus)
  - **A megaphone/loudspeaker/appropriately rolled up piece of card** (John was a voice crying in the wilderness)



- **A hairy looking jacket**, perhaps made of angora wool? (John wore camel skin)
- **A jar of honey** (part of John's austerity diet)
- **A locust/grasshopper model or picture** (the other part of John's diet)
- **A bad hair day wig** (he was a wild-looking man)
- **A metal chain** (John ended up in prison)
- **A lantern** - see John 5:35 (this is how Jesus described his cousin John)
- **A small signpost** (John was someone who showed the way to Jesus)

Bring each of these objects out in an intriguing way but do not make the connection to John immediately. Let that come from the congregation with a bit of help. Point out that John is a focus on this second Sunday of Advent on the way towards Christmas.

Light the second Advent candle.

Read the key verse (see above) and have an opening prayer.

3 Sing together 'Make way' (Mission Praise 457 and in various other song and hymn books)

4 The Bible reading: you will need more than one voice for this and should include someone speaking as Isaiah, a narrator, a member of the crowd, John, a tax collector and a soldier.

Luke 3:2-18 (beginning with the words: 'The word of God came to John...')

There is a dramatic version of this, involving lots of set phrases for the different people involved in this story. See the chapter on Trinity in *Footsteps to the Feast*.

John prepared the way for Jesus. He was outspoken. He called a spade a spade and a sinner a sinner! He was unafraid to speak his mind. It sounds very uncomfortable to us today but it worked then. People responded. However, even John's blunt speaking was too much for King Herod and it got John arrested.

John was a signpost to the truth about God as revealed in Jesus. *I wonder what signpost-people helped you on your way to God?* Turn and talk to each other in small groups and tell each other who helped/is helping you on the way to Jesus. Invite those who are willing to share some of what is said for everyone to hear.

5 Sing together 'Soon and very soon we are going to see the King' (Junior Praise). John's message was that a lamb who was a king was coming. During the Advent season we not only look forward to Christmas but also to the coming of Jesus as King at the end of time.

6 Prayers together: use some of the objects that you produced to point towards John from the beginning of the service. For example:

*The 'camel hair' jacket and honey* - John was an eco-friendly prophet. Pray for actions against climate change.



*The locust/grasshopper model or picture* - although John may have enjoyed eating them, these creatures ate up crops and caused devastation and still do today. Pray for places in the world which are affected by famine, natural disasters and wars.

*Chains* - John ended up in prison for speaking the truth. Pray for those today facing a hard time, even imprisonment, because they are Christians; pray also for those who feel imprisoned by illness, loneliness and bereavement.

*Lantern and Lamb* - John was the lantern that pointed to Jesus, the light of the world. Pray the Christian witness in many churches this Christmas that many will come to hear of Jesus for the first time and respond to his love.

7 Sing together 'All heaven declares'. The words 'the lamb upon the throne' are part of the song and the lamb was John's chosen description of Jesus.

8 John built on what was already out there in the minds and hearts and expectations of the people then, in order to prepare them for Jesus.

What is 'out there' today that we can build on?

**Pour out all the pieces of the 1,000-piece jigsaw on to a table.**

For many people, life is a complete and utter puzzle. The meaning of it all is lost and everyone just gets on with their particular piece the best they can.

But at the same time, there is an awareness that maybe there is a bigger picture.

**Hand out a few pieces and see if some people can try and guess from the one piece what the big picture might be. Make sure that the picture on the box cover is hidden!**

Everyone gets a different idea. Some people, in an attempt to try to make some meaning out of the puzzle, start tackling some of the big questions. They start working on parts of the jigsaw, if you like. Classic examples are:

*The evolution verses creation debate*

*How can a loving God allow suffering?*

*The hypocrisy of some who claim to be Christian*

And the classic question from children: *but who made God?*

**Maybe people can suggest other knotty questions which people try and solve.**

Working with these questions - the great unknowns - is like trying to start the jigsaw in the middle and piece a few bits together. It usually leads to despair and giving up.



Perhaps, taking a leaf out of John's preaching strategy, it would be better to start in a different place; and, just as is best with a jigsaw, to start with the **known** edges or corners. I wonder what known four corners we can start with to help people come close to God? In the story John started with people's awareness of need (they were an occupied people and times were hard); with memories from the past of God and the hope of a better future; with prophecies about a Messiah one day. What are the things like this that we can start with in our age and generation?

**(Draw out from the pile of smaller jigsaw pieces the following four slightly larger corner pieces, one at a time, each with the word/words on them as indicated.)**

*a) A piece of jigsaw and with the word **Jesus** on it*

Start with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This is the key story that will help put everything else in its place. These are facts of history that have never been disproved. Start with Jesus and this will help begin to discover the big picture.

*b) A piece of jigsaw of with the words **Christian friendson** it*

Most people come to faith, not because of arguments and clever apologetics but because they see something different in the lives of their friends. If you're a Christian, that means you and me. The way we live, the priorities we have, the attitudes we display, the love we show, this is what helps people come close to Jesus.

*c) A piece of jigsaw with the word **World** on it*

This is an amazing world and at some time or other its incredible variety and beauty has taken everyone's breath away. But it's more than that. If we look back over the last 2000 years of the history of our world, so much of our art, literature, music, laws and the founding of charities and so on have been inspired by people's Christian faith. There is so much good out there; never mind Richard Dawkins' 'selfish gene', what about the amazing existence of the 'selfless gene', which goes against our animal instincts and which points to the existence of God. This is another jigsaw piece - a key corner piece that can help us begin to get this picture right.

*d) A piece of jigsaw with the word **Me** on it*

This piece is so important. It's another corner piece to help point the way towards getting the big picture. In each one of us there is something of God that cannot be denied and which points to the existence of God - we are spiritual beings. At Christmas we will read again of 'the light that enlightens every man and that was coming into the world'. There is a light buried in all of us because we are created beings, and the light is an inner witness. It tells us deep down that we belong to God and are made by God. Children have this light burning bright and we see this so often in their responses to the Christian story and their understanding. The light is in all of us, but is often denied or smothered in some way. But this inner longing in 'me' is another place that we, as John the Baptists of today, must build on to help people get ready for Jesus.



Each one of us is called to be like John the Baptist. We need to help people start *with what they can know* - the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the facts of the world and its history and culture, the witness of Christian friends, and the inner promptings of our spiritual nature. This will help them get ready for Jesus.

What sort of witnesses will we be this week? Don't get involved in fiddling around trying to solve what we don't know in the middle of the picture but start with what we can know and help others to come to know Jesus for themselves.

End this section with a prayer for our work as 'Christian John the Baptists' this Advent and for our friends who we long will come to know Jesus.

9 Final song together: 'Prepare the way for Jesus to return' (Songs of Fellowship 457). This may be new but has just the right words as it links today's story with the second coming. An alternative might be 'How beautiful on the mountains are the feet'.