



# The Round Church at St Andrew the Great Cambridge

A Sermon Preached  
on Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> July 1999  
by Mark Ashton

10p

John 3:22-36

## The Life-giver

### Introduction: A tale of two teachers

This gospel of John which we are working our way through at the moment introduces John the Baptist right at the beginning: in the prologue, the first few verses of chapter 1. He plays a major part in chapter 1; and here in chapter 3 he reappears, but he isn't going to play any further part in this gospel from here on, bar a couple of brief passing references to him in chapters 5 and 10. In that first chapter he provided a pointer to Jesus ('*a witness to the light*' it says). But here in Chapter 3 he is going to be more of a contrast to Jesus.

One of the features of the press reporting of Wimbledon is the pre-match comparisons of the two tennis players. We read all about the speed of their respective first serves, how many points each of them win when they come in to the net; and we read about the results of their previous encounters. Seeing how they measure up against one another is an important prelude to the actual contest itself. We are invited to forecast the result. I fear yesterday it said it all! Five Sampras/Henman encounters—five (sadly now six) Sampras victories.

And at the end of this chapter (John chapter 3) the writer of the gospel invites us to learn more about Jesus by comparing and contrasting Him with His older cousin John the Baptist, who was also a significant teacher in Israel at the time. It's the tale of two teachers. First we are invited to consider John himself.

### 1) John the Baptist

(vv. 22-30)

John the Baptist was a considerable religious leader in his own right. We know this from the non-Christian historian Josephus, who had quite a bit to say about John the Baptist. We can see it from our passage where King Herod clearly regarded John's popular following

as sufficiently large to constitute a political threat, so he had him imprisoned (v. 24) and in due course he went on to behead him. Jesus' own verdict on John was that "*Among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist*" (Matt 11:11). And it's clear from Acts 19 that there were people who were still following John the Baptist during the early years of the Church. Which, if you think about it, is a bit of a puzzle . . . because John himself was quite clear that it was his job to point people to Jesus—away from himself to the One who was going to take away their sins. And yet his movement (people following John the Baptist) continued even after Jesus had come on the scene and His followers had begun baptising people themselves.

One might expect at that point that John would close down and leave it all to Jesus. But perhaps the implication of verse 23 is that there were too many people coming for baptism for Jesus and His followers to deal with them all: '*John was also baptising ... because there was plenty of water, and people were constantly coming to be baptised.*' There may have been some uncertainty at this point among John's disciples anyway, granted the remarks John had been making about the limitations of his own ministry: '*He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie*' (1:27).

But notice that the argument with a certain Jew in 3:25 didn't concern a comparison between the respective merits of being baptised by John or by Jesus' followers. It was an argument over the matter of ceremonial washing: '*An argument developed between some of John's disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing.*' How do we get rid of sin? That was the question about ceremonial washing. So the implication of John's disciples' comment in the following verse is: to whom should we send people

who want forgiveness? *‘They came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—well, he is baptising, and everyone is going to him” ’* (v. 26).

It sounds a bit like a complaint, doesn’t it? But John’s reply is unequivocal: *‘To this John replied, “A man can receive only what is given him from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.’ The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater: I must become less” ’* (vv. 27-30).

### Recognising reality

Notice that this is honesty rather than humility on John’s part. We tend to read it as a wonderful example of John’s humility; but look again at what he says in verse 27: *“A man can receive only what is given him from heaven.”* He says can receive—not a man should receive only what is given him from heaven. Calvin commented on that verse: ‘He denies it is in his power or theirs to make him great, because the stature of us all is that we are what God wanted us to be.’ God is the giver of all gifts and abilities. He is the Lord of the circumstances of our lives. And Christian ethics is largely a matter of getting back in step with reality.

We behave badly (and my assumption is that we all do and that we’re all conscious of that) because our own importance is distorted in our own eyes. We get out of step with reality and we think the world centres round me, that what is happening to me is more important than it actually is. So in verse 30 John was not expressing a wish but a truth: *“He must become greater; I must become less.”* This would happen. It was a compelling, divine necessity. God had so ordained it. And John was glad to accept it. In fact the growing success of Jesus’ ministry proved the authenticity of John’s ministry (that he was who he said he was—the one who’d come to point Israel to her Saviour): *“You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.’ The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend [we might say the best man] who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine and is now complete”* (v. 28, 29).

It’s never easy to give way to a successor—certainly with joy. Some will remember Ted Heath’s prolonged sulk after Margaret Thatcher succeeded him. William Barclay tells a delightful story of an American minister, Dr. Spence, ‘who was popular and his church was full; but as the years passed his people drifted away . . . to the church across the road where a new young minister was attracting the crowds. One evening in Dr. Spence’s church there was a very small gathering. The doctor looked at the little flock. “Where have all the people gone?” he asked. There was an embarrassed silence; then one of his office-bearers said: “I think they have gone to the church across the street to hear the new minister.” Dr. Spence was silent for a moment; then he smiled. “Well, then,” he said, “I think we ought to follow them.” And he descended from his pulpit and led his people across the road.’

Christian behaviour requires us to recognise reality—to look below the surface of life and to discern what God is doing, and then to acknowledge that our talents and our abilities are from Him, and to ponder what His purposes may be, both inside time and outside and beyond time. We are invited to bring our behaviour into line with God’s purposes—which will be fulfilled. Jesus will reign. There are problems in your and my life if that truth never fully sinks into us this side of death: that Jesus will reign—over you and over me, whether we like it or not. Are you and I realistic about that? Or do we keep fooling ourselves that maybe, at the end of the day, our will is going to overcome His in some way?

I guess there are many gifted people here this morning, but are we realistic that our gifts all come from Him? Look again at verse 27: *‘A man can receive only what is given him from heaven.’* Are you pretty good at something? It was God’s gift to you! Are we realistic about whose plan for our lives will be fulfilled? You and I may achieve some of our dreams (I’ve got old enough to know that I am not going to achieve many of my dreams this side of eternity) but one day you and I will stand beyond death and look back on our years here on this earth and we will realise the truth of John’s motto: *‘He must become greater; I must become less.’* It is a truth, not a wish. And it is because it’s true that you and I can have the encouragement to change our behaviour to get in line with it—less of me, more of Him. Recognising reality. It is not clear whether verses 31-36 are still John the Baptist speaking or whether they are the comment of John the gospel writer, the evangelist. But they certainly fill out what the Baptist has just said. So the focus now shifts on to Jesus Himself.

## 2) Jesus

(vv. 31-36)

*“The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no-one accepts his testimony. The man who has accepted it has certified that God is truthful. For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit. The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him”* (vv. 31-36).

### Not different, but unique

Now we see that this was never actually a comparison between two great teachers (never actually Sampras and Henman being weighed up together). It is a contrast. John has not been saying that Jesus is greater than others. He’s been saying that Jesus is totally different from all others. It isn’t a case of bigger, better, greater—not even of biggest, best, greatest. Jesus is unique. He is incomparable. Comparisons with other religious leaders cannot be made: they are instantly invalid.

The way John had put this earlier in his ministry was by saying in effect, “I can make you wet—but He can give you the Spirit of the Living God.” “I can make you wet by baptism, the most that any human can do for any other [as I did last Sunday morning for Nicole and little David]; but He can give you the Spirit of the Living God.” And that is what God alone can do: the conversion that Nicole testified to last week.

The way John puts that here is in verses 31 and 32: *“The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no-one accepts his testimony.”*

I don’t know if you’ve ever been in the situation on a car journey where you have to ask someone for directions. As a family we often seem to end up in that situation. And I have some fairly carefully worked out criteria for deciding whom to ask—because you’re always late (that’s one of the rules of that situation, isn’t it?) And it’s crucial that you pick the right person to ask the way first time. Or you just end up even later than you were or hopelessly more lost because some

well-meaning soul has sent you in entirely the wrong direction. Well, I won’t say any more about my own particular criteria for selecting whom to ask the way from, lest I give any offence to the young and others who might be present! But I want us to think of the reply one least wants to hear when you are in that situation: lost, late and needing to ask the way. You don’t pick somebody with an Australian flag on the back of their rucksack or something like that, because you don’t want them to be saying, “I’m sorry, I’m a stranger here myself.” That’s just what you don’t want to hear. You want somebody who will say, “Oh yes; I’ve been living here all my life, I know that road like the back of my hand. It’s the third set of traffic lights, on the right. You can’t miss it.”

When it comes to the things of heaven, we are all strangers. That’s what John is saying here. Since Genesis chapter 3 the entire human race are strangers to heaven, we are born east of Eden. So whom do we ask about heaven? If you want to know about the things of eternity to whom do you turn? *“The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard ...*□ There is nothing pejorative about that term ‘the earth’ in that verse. It’s just that it isn’t heaven, and it can’t know about heaven. So where do we turn to know about heaven, about infinity, about eternity, about where we come from and where we’re going to? To the One who belongs there, the One who is no stranger there because it all belongs to Him.

As we know, there are many on earth who set themselves up to tell us about heaven. They might not use that term (heaven)—they may talk about finding fulfilment or satisfaction, finding purpose, locating meaning, value, rediscovering our self-worth, our self-esteem; becoming integrated, wholeness, finding truth or inner peace, achieving oneness with creation, understanding ourselves, freedom, self-authentication. But all those expressions are human beings reaching out for heaven, for God, for the things of eternity. And there is only one Person who can speak to us about them with authority: *‘the one who comes from above’*.

Who shapes your opinions? Where do you look for wisdom? Is it a parent, a friend, a particular writer, the media, some spiritual guru? They all have a part to play. But they cannot tell us about heaven. They are of the earth (says John). They are strangers to heaven. That is not necessarily bad, but it is limited. But it’s bad

when their voices stop us hearing the one voice that is from heaven: ***“He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no-one accepts his testimony. The man who has accepted it has certified that God is truthful.”*** (v. 32, 33). There is a way to cut through to the truthfulness of God, and it is by Jesus: if you take Jesus seriously then the truth of God will come home to you.

I wonder sometimes if we use Jesus to shape our thinking—the way that the media conditions our attitudes to things all the time. We watch films, news, advertising, favourite soap operas: do we ever think, *I wonder what Jesus would think of that?* If Jesus was sitting beside me, what would He make of the values I’ve just swallowed? We don’t make use of Him as we should: we let all sorts of other things influence us. I’m sure you know where you’ll find the best paid writers, actors, producers, directors. They’re not in the films; they’re in the commercials. That’s where the big money is. All the most talented people are working in the area of commercials in order to persuade you and me to buy products we don’t want most of the time. Those people are influencing our thinking all the time. I wonder if when we have watched a TV advert we sometimes say, “I wonder what Jesus would say about that!”

### A matter of life or wrath

Notice what the final verses of the passage say about Him: ***“For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit. The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him”*** (vv. 34-36). I’m going to put up a summary of them from a previous sermon.

- (1) **Jesus speaks God’s words** (v. 34a)  
The one whom God has sent speaks the words of God.
- (2) **Jesus has God’s Spirit** (v. 34b)  
Notice the link between God’s words and God’s Spirit
- (3) **Jesus wields God’s Power** (v. 35)
- (4) **Jesus gives God’s Life** (v. 36)

There’s a huge amount in those few verses, more than I can talk about now. But when those truths about Jesus dawn upon us it’s like the difference between being at school and getting a message from the headteacher via one of the prefects, and the headteacher himself coming and sticking his/her head round the classroom door and addressing us directly. And because these things are

true, how we treat Jesus is how we treat God. You can get away with cheeking the prefect, can’t you, when he/she brings the message? But when it’s the headteacher at the door our attitude is entirely different.

And that’s what these verses are saying to us about Jesus Christ. I cannot get you to accept Jesus as your own Lord and Saviour, to make Him the Ruler of your life, but I can plead with you this morning not to think that you can put Jesus to one side and still pretend you are taking God seriously. If you and I haven’t faced up to Jesus we haven’t faced up to God: ***“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.”*** (v. 36). It’s a life or wrath matter.

Eternal life is to know God through Jesus. It starts now and it takes the believer through death into God’s presence for ever.

And God’s wrath is experienced in the present too: it is not to know God now. God’s wrath is to turn His head and to say, “Away!” to those who reject His Son. Do you think God is remote? Do you think He is irrelevant? Do you think God is dead, that He isn’t concerned with our lives this coming week? That is the wrath of God: God’s settled hostility to evil which causes Him to turn His face away. It is that cry of desolation from the cross, as Jesus took upon Himself the consequence of my sin: ***“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”***

Evading that wrath is such a simple matter. Do you see it there in verse 36? It is so simple: ***“Whoever believes in the Son*** [who trusts that Jesus is at the centre of everything, that Jesus will reign, that He must become greater] ***has eternal life. But whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.”*** It is just to crown Jesus King—to stop listening to my own ideas about heaven, or this earth’s ideas, and to trust the One who knows, the Life-giver.

*(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)*