

Patronal Festival and Deanery Evensong

John the Baptist, Boldre. 23 June 2019

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John the Baptist: an uncouth, unkempt, hairy denizen of the desert. A health-food freak insectivore: gobbling locusts, the scratchy roughage of their barbed, brittle limbs, and their dry, rattling wings, balancing perfectly the oily protein of their thoraxes and abdomens.

The grubs of bees, marinated in their own honey, his sweetest of sweet desert desserts that, once upon a time, delighted wild-eyed Samson when discovered in a lion's carcass. That brightened the eyes of David's friend Jonathan when found dripping from combs on the forest floor, and taken up to the mouth on the haft of his spear.

John the Baptist: an anti-establishment man in the uniform of a prophet, likened to the politically dangerous Elijah the Tishbite: the "disturber of Israel", the nemesis of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel.

John the Baptist: robed in camel-hair, girdled in leather. A fulminator against evil, a loud man, an outspoken man, a man of the people. They flocked to him. So a dangerous man: "off with his head, off with his head".

As unlikely a patron saint as you'd ever find for this tranquil, civilized, lovely church in its tree-leafy, butter-cupped and daisied, gentle, south of England setting.

John the Baptist. John the Baptist: a coarse patron for a sophisticated church, a church that month by month civilizes Old Testament barbarity into Anglican chant, and transposes the nasal droning and shrieking ululations of ancient Semites into ethereal Elizabethan polyphony and rich Victorian harmony and propriety.

A wild, uncouth, poverty-choosing, loud-mouthed, anti-establishment, tell it like it is, brutally executed outsider. And yet, ridiculously, the patron of civilized, lovely, gentle, homely, conservative and comfortable, dear, dear St John's Boldre. Patronage turned upside down and on its head.

Appropriately, appropriately, appropriately For that's just what Christianity does. Topsy-turveys convention. Pops with paradoxes, sizzles with surprises. Puts the first last, the last first, declares the poor blessed, squeezes and squelches the wealthy through the eye of a needle, turns the other cheek, walks the second mile, forgives not once, twice, thrice or seven times, but seventy times seven, declares crucifixion a victory, bad Friday, Good Friday, death life, the impossible possible, the fool wise and sacrificing love the ultimate virtue, and life's very *raison d'être*.

So subversive, it subverts even subversion. For there's no ideology, no philosophy, no form of government, school of thought or scheme of life, unchallenged or untroubled by it. It's disturbing, exciting, challenging, life-enhancing and we love it beyond telling for all of that and more.

Dress infinity in finitude, clothe almighty God, in time and space and what you see, what you get is a carpenter, hanging on a tree.

Love distilled in human existence and experience, is a clown on a donkey, a peripatetic healing wierdo, a spinner of yarns, soft on the marginalised sinner, but tough on the hypocrite: a turner of the other cheek, walker of the second and third mile, a forgiveness freak, a carpenter hanging on a tree, a corpse in a grave.

It's so startling, over the top, radical, different. We love him, love him, love him. This is God as never, ever envisaged. God unthinkable, God blasphemous, God mind-blowing, God liberating, God life-changing, God redeeming.

Heralded by John the Baptist. A patron saint so inappropriately appropriate, nonsensically sensible, unfeasibly feasible for the radical, paradoxical, challenging, topsy-turveying, heart-grabbing, subversive, compelling faith we love, preach and attempt to live in this lovely Church.

Viva John the Baptist! Viva St John's Boldre! Viva the coruscating, coward-cowing, cracklingly compelling Christ! Jesus: the clown on a donkey, peripatetic spinner of yarns, healing wierdo, forgiveness freak, subversive King of Kings.