

Texts: Malachi 3:1-4, Luke 1:68-79 and Luke 3:1-6

Date: 5<sup>th</sup> December 2021

Place: MUC

Theme: Second Fiddle

### **Introduction**

By the time of Luke's Gospel, the Romans have destroyed the Jerusalem Temple, and news about Jesus has begun to spread beyond Palestine to pockets around the Roman Empire.

In that context, no less than in the decades earlier when Elizabeth and Mary were preparing to give birth to their sons, the message of God's peace comes to a world more practiced at the art of warfare than it is at the craft of reconciliation (cf. Luke 19:42). Let's be clear, God's peace stands in striking contrast to the peace of the Roman Caesars, during whose reign John and Jesus are both born and executed.

Luke uses the word "peace" more often than the other three Gospels combined. Indeed, God's peace is a message that frames the beginning and end of this Gospel and permeates its message throughout. Here, near the beginning, Zechariah sings that God will "guide our feet into the way of peace." His prophecy is fulfilled near the conclusion of the narrative when the risen Christ stands among his followers and announces, "Peace be with you" (24:36). In the end, Zechariah's song is not simply a way to announce the birth of John the Baptist, but rather to proclaim God's faithfulness, God's salvation, and God's peace.

### **Let us pray...**

*O God, we pray, speak in this place, in the calming of our minds and the longing of our hearts, by the words of my lips and in the meditations of our hearts. Speak, O God, for your servants listen. Amen.*

The good news of Jesus Christ begins with John the Baptist wild John, long-haired John, John dressed in the skins of wild animals wandering the wilderness eating honey and locusts crying out to the people - Repent – The Kingdom of God is at hand.

Repent. The Kingdom of God is at hand.

Most of us know about John the Baptist – An eccentric prophet, who spoke truth to powers and his head landed on a platter.

What is the role of John the Baptist? Or what is his real calling? There is a little rhyme that describes John the Baptist perfectly. It goes like this: *“It takes more grace than I can tell To play the second fiddle well.”*

A maestro was asked what the most difficult spot was to fill in an orchestra. He thought for a moment and then replied, “The second fiddle. I can get plenty of first violinists, but to find someone who can play the second fiddle with enthusiasm – that’s a problem. And if we have no second fiddle, we have no *harmony*.”

What’s the meaning of second fiddle? *“One that plays a supporting or subservient role, to be less important or in a weaker position than someone else.”* This little phrase, playing second fiddle, has some definite negative undertones.

Before I move the conversation further, let me be clear. In a patriarchal culture women are often asked to play second fiddle to men. Why should that be? Women should not and must not be seen just as followers. I am talking about being a second fiddle based on gender, race or financial status.

Am I clear? You understand what I am saying? Most people don’t like playing second fiddle. Most people aspire to play first fiddle, to be in control, to be noticed.

Right in the middle of having great ‘success’ as a preaching prophet, at the peak of his ministry, John the Baptist stepped back and said, *“Somebody else is coming who is greater than I am. Pay attention to him, not me. He must increase. I must decrease. He must increase. I must decrease.* What John the Baptist was saying is, *“From now on, I’m going to be second fiddle. It’s not about you and me. It’s all about Jesus.”*

NOW, let’s be clear it wasn’t that John had a low self-image or self-confidence problems. He was an incredibly courageous person and incredibly bold. I believe that he could be so bold and so confident with the crowds precisely because he had his priorities straight. He knew his role. He knew what he was about. For John the Baptist, Jesus first, everything else is second. As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,

John answered all of them by saying, *‘I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I, is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.’* Luke 3:15-17

John’s disciples struggled with the fact that the crowds were now going to Jesus. John assured them that this was just as God had ordained it. He understood that he was the “best man” who was to find joy in attending to the bridegroom and listening to his voice.

NOW let’s put yourself in John the Baptist’s shoes...watching two of your closest disciples walk off to follow another... watching the multitudes leave to seek out someone else.

I’m sure you can understand the possible temptations that John faced. He could have ignored Jesus and selfishly sought the admiration of the crowds and his followers. But he didn’t. John the Baptist knew who he was. John the Baptist knew his calling.

John the Baptist knew that Jesus must increase, and he decrease.

Have you ever got the feeling that someone believes they are indispensable?

Have you ever heard people say things like:

- I am the only one who can do this job
- Without me, this project/team/organization would fail
- So and so cannot live without me
- Everything depends on my being there
- "It" (event, project, job) can't start without me

Can I level with you? Promise you won't be offended? None of us is indispensable, including me. I am not minimising your individual contributions to the life of Manningham Uniting Church. I am not trying to minimise your gifts and graces. In my many years in ministry there are some who acted like they are God's gift to the church or the world. You know what I mean? They think they are indispensable. They think they can't retire, can't let go and let others.

Sometimes I say to some of my colleagues: *"If we ever think we are indispensable. We need to take a walk in the cemetery. Many thought that they were indispensable and now they are lying here in the cemetery."*

We all need to have a healthy perspective of ourselves. John the Baptist knew that he wasn't the Christ, or the Messiah or the ONE. Even with his great oratorical gifts, his large following, his amazing sense of the justice, he simply says, "I am a VOICE calling in the wilderness..." ... not a man, not a preacher, not even a prophet... just a VOICE... an instrument of God.

John knew who he was, and he was confident in his role as the voice of God. A second fiddle. John was willing to play second fiddle for Jesus.

He was to build a soap box for Jesus. He was to prepare the way for Jesus. He was to decrease and Jesus to increase. Second fiddle was the role that God called John the Baptist to fulfill. His role was to prepare for the advent of Jesus Christ. That John understood his role is clearly seen in his own words, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). The role of second fiddle is not an inconsequential role but rather a significant one.

On this second Sunday of Advent as we wait for the prince of peace let's recall the last word of the Lord to Malachi, the prophet, who said: *"Behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts."* (Malachi 3:1)

All the prophets said, "He is coming". John said, "He is here." He introduced Jesus to the nation as the Messiah: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" ([John 1:29](#)).

We must remember that although John saw Jesus, spoke to Him, baptized Him, and introduced Him to the people, he did not see Jesus crucified and risen from the dead and ascended into heaven.

Remember John Wesley? We are told that when Wesley was converted, when his heart was warmed by the gospel of Christ, he made a covenant with God as follows: *"I am no longer my own, but thine. Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt; put me to doing, put me to suffering; let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee, exalted for thee or brought low for thee; let me be full, let me be empty; let me have all things, let me have nothing; I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal. And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it. And the Covenant which I have made on earth let it be ratified in heaven."*

*John Wesley*

Wesley used his covenant among his Methodist societies for many years, and it explains as much as anything else the tremendous power of that movement. It is the power of the humble.

The Bible tells us that God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble. God does not work with the proud; God works against them.

When we learn that the cause is bigger than anyone person involved in it, we will again become channels of God's power and grace. Making ourselves dispensable is immensely liberating. It frees us to do what we want to do – not what others expect us to. It frees others too, although they may not realize nor warm to it initially.

By making ourselves dispensable we are allowing others to take responsibility, to learn and to grow. What a gift to others! And isn't that fundamentally what great leadership is about? Why would we want to keep that gift to ourselves by acting as if we are indispensable?

John's one job. Was to say get ready. Make a straight path for Jesus. Not to build a soap box for himself but Jesus. Let us all who seek to serve God remember this.

Meanwhile as we wait for the coming of the prince of peace, let's be content to serve God the way John the Baptist did.

Amen.