I don’t think most of us would go to John the Baptist’s church. He’s a bit intense. He’s not very vicary – his degree is not from Oxbridge and he tends to be a bit…a bit well black and white. Not very nuanced. He’d look rubbish in a cassock.

Got two cloaks? Give one away. More food than you need? Give it away. Don’t cheat on your taxes. He’s a no messing, straight forward kind of guy. All of the eulogies for Desmond Tutu this last week – one headline got me.

‘He told the truth’.

In a jaded age, where life is cloaked in multiple layers of irony and lived behind multiple screens with filters where nobody is quite sure of anything, the truth is valuable. Cutting through guck. But the truth about the truth is that it’s often painful. Sometimes I sit with the scripture in holding it out before the church and think – can they take it – does this need softening somehow? I’ve been lecturing where I’ve read something out that’s particularly harsh and sometimes I’d get a look – like now tell us the way out of the direct meaning of this passage. We often know the truth but try and find some way around it in our hearts.

V15 As the people were filled with expectation and all were questioning in their hearts whether John might be the messiah….

This is a key passage in the scripture. We know that John the Baptist was incredibly popular at the time – people are flocking to him out in the desert, there are leaders from Jerusalem – both sadducees and pharisees coming out, then teachers and soldiers – all sorts. He has cross-generational engagement – in modern times – he’d go on Graham Norton and write a book. Or maybe a blog or a vlog – whatever that is. He’d get awards for services to speaking ‘truth to power’ and people would venerate him. Later on he’d write a cook book – 50 ways with locusts and honey the Baptist diet…see I’m joking but he is popular – the crowds love him. Like us in this day and age, the Jews of the time felt they were on the edge of the end of the world and waiting for their deliverer to come.

But he John doesn’t get a book deal. He doesn’t even go on ‘This Morning’ with Philip Scofield. He refuses it#:

V16 I baptize you with water but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie his sandals.

John refuses the popularity because he knows he is not the star, he’s the warm-up guy. And however good the warm up guy is – the role is always to build the anticipation waiting for the main event. I went to see Stevie Wonder a few years ago and Lionel Richie was the support. This is an amazing sort of legend billing and however good Lionel was – voice was easy like Sunday morning – the whole crowd is waiting for Stevie and even Mr Richie knew it. The job of the warm up guy is to make way for the main event. John is the last in the line of the prophets – running all the way back to Moses. One voice after another – there is one coming, he’s on his way, he’ll liberate, he’ll lead, he’ll provide, forgive and make right…John is the last proper prophet and Jesus is the one they’ve all been waiting for.

V17 He will baptise you with the spirit and with fire

Looking forward we see this at Pentecost, where Jesus is the one who sends the spirit in tongues of fire. But sitting with it, we have to confess that as an image fire is not normally positive – it is a destructive force and sometimes a purifying one. Here John connects that fire with an image of the day of the lord – a day of judgement like where wheat is separated from the husky-chaffy bit at harvest time. Now truth is we get a bit uncomfortable when we talk about Jesus and judgement. We like a cuddly Jesus not a judgy one. But it’s not what John likes or doesn’t like instead

John sees Jesus.

He sees him for who he is and it changes his life. And accepts him, as he is, for who he is. Seeing Jesus, John knows he’s not the star of the show at all. ‘You must increase and I must decrease Lord’. And this does separate him out from those around him. John is released from that desire for more and more personal enrichment, fame and glut, the cult of ‘more’ and instead says ‘I was born to kiss your feet’. St Georges, who is the star of your show? We’re all warm up acts, meant to be pointing to the main event but are you trying to get a cookbook deal on the side – be a bit more of the centre? Our lives find their meaning, we find our identity, not as we look deeper into ourselves or have more ‘me-time’ but as we look to the son. As we ‘see Jesus’. In the churches year, we’ve entered the time of ‘epiphany’ and so we’ll be thinking a bit more about those characters that recognise Jesus and hearing too some of our local stories of people who came to worship the son.

Last point from this is the baptism of Jesus himself. The baptism of Jesus is one of the clearest example of the Trinity operating in the whole bible. Jesus is baptised, the spirit descends upon Jesus and the Father’s voice affirms Jesus.

 ‘You are my son the Beloved with you I am well pleased’.

In Matthew, the phrase goes ‘this is my son, where Luke has ‘you are my son’. Matthew means for those around to understand, whereas here in Luke, the voice is encouraging Jesus’ ministry which is about to kick into gear. The Father sees the Son and recognises him. When we say, Jesus is the ‘Son of God’ partly what we’re saying is that Jesus is the one whom the Father recognises that God holds out to us. That in Jesus – this is it – we’re not waiting for anyone else. I remember seeing a pamphlet saying that all religions are waiting for the full revelation of God and I just said out loud, no we aren’t. Jesus is the culmination of all the hopes, the dreams and desires of nations, kings and angels to see the Lord. Those who have seen the son, have seen the Father and spirit.

Christians often say that we believe in God, but a better phrase is that I believe in the Trinity, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They don’t work in isolation, instead the father sends the son, who sends the spirit, the spirit points to the son, who points to the Father, who blesses the son and so we have this God of ours that isn’t just solitary but is in relationship that shows itself through history, as God makes himself known.

Wilton, I hold before you Jesus Christ. The whole sweep of the prophets leading to John the Baptist sees him – looks to him, even the Father Almighty God of God and Lord of Lords, sees him. St Georges – have you seen him? behold the Son.