

## **Sermons at All Saints Anglican Church of Luxembourg**

**Preached by Rev Alison Heal on Sunday 11th January 2026**

**Bible passages: Isaiah 42:1-9 and Matthew 3:13-end**

John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, wearing his camel hair clothes, eating locusts and wild honey. He drew the crowds of everyday people to him, and they heard his call to prepare themselves, through repentance and being washed clean. They came to him in the river Jordan and he washed them ceremonially clean, a wild version of the Jewish mikvah bath. They were excited, they were challenged, they were humbled, they wanted to be ready. 'Repent' he was urging them, 'for the kingdom of heaven has come near'.

And so they walked into the flowing water, cold against the sun's heat on their skins, and their sins and failings were washed away, and they walked out, ready for this new thing God was going to do. Whatever it was.

Some of the higher-ups came to John, too. They were ready to be immersed in the river, but he had harsh words for them: 'you brood of vipers', he challenged them: 'who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?'

Not an easy man to live with, John the Baptist. A real one to speak truth to power.

He accepted the repentance of the ordinary people, but he expected more of the religious and political elites. 'Bear fruit worthy of repentance' he told them. Don't come to me proud of your heritage and your good works. Come for baptism stripped of your qualifications and your claims. As the kingdom of heaven comes near, your qualifications and your claims mean nothing.

John had an inkling about who was coming, what this coming kingdom looked like. Jesus was little-known at that point, but John pointed out Jesus to his own followers: 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'

John knew his watery baptism was just a foreshadow of what Jesus would bring. 'The one who is coming after me, he said, will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.' And the brood of political vipers had better look out – the one who is coming would clear the worthless chaff and burn it away.

An uncomfortable man, John.

Then Jesus, his cousin, came to him. 'Repent, and be baptised?' You, the Lamb of God? The one who takes away the sins of the world? 'No, I can't wash away sins you don't have. You should be baptising me!'

But Jesus gently insisted. The one man who needed no repentance, no turning back to God his father, asked again to be baptised, saying: 'Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness'.

Did John understand? Who knows. But he consented, and Jesus was washed in the cold flowing waters of the Jordan, and emerged to an experience of unity between the heavens and the earth. Water streaming from his hair, he saw the veil lifted which hides God's heavens from us in ordinary life. Jesus, the Son of God, had a glimpse of what he had sacrificed to live our human life. Father, Son and Holy Spirit, were united in an unusually visible way.

God our Father spoke: this is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased. God the Holy Spirit descended like a dove over the waters, like the Spirit hovering over the waters in creation, God the Son heard the affirmation of his calling, the call to be God's chosen, in whom God's soul delights, the call to open eyes, to open dungeons, to set people free.

And do you know what he did next? He went into the wilderness, like his cousin John, and spent the next 40 days alone, fasting.

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The Gospels give us this roller coaster account of the early days of Jesus' ministry. John the Baptist, full of fire and accusation, but with flocks of people hearing the hope in his words, and responding in repentance.

Jesus the little-known carpenter, beginning to teach and find some followers.

And then comes this impossible request: the human cousin, fiery but all too aware of his human nature, his own failings, asked to wash away sins which he somehow knows don't exist. Due to the work of the Holy Spirit in him, this prophet John is aware that Jesus is something else: the one human who doesn't need to turn back to God. God has always been with him, in him – who knows how John understands this, because it's still beyond our comprehension, but John knows that Jesus has no need to repent.

So let's step back from this snapshot of the two cousins in the river, trying to work out the impossible puzzle.

Let's look at Jesus' words. He insisted on being baptised by John, saying: 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.' In the wonderful way of these things, I looked into four books of Bible commentaries and found four different explanations of what Jesus meant about 'fulfilling all righteousness'. One book suggested that 'righteousness' refers to the words of the prophets. 'It is necessary for us to do this baptism, to fulfil the words of the prophets like Isaiah, who predicted this unusually humble Messiah who was to come.

Another book suggested that 'righteousness' means the work of God's kingdom. This would mean: 'It is necessary for us to do this baptism, to begin the work of God's kingdom here on earth'.

The other two ideas were variations on these themes. And it does seem possible to put the various ideas together. Isaiah's prophecy, which Vanessa read to us, is fulfilled when God speaks the words of affirmation to his Son. God's kingdom work begins, and it's the kingdom work predicted by Isaiah, a kingdom where the eyes of the blind are opened, and the prisoners are brought from the dungeons.

Imagine yourself there at the river, one of the people coming to John and hearing the call to repent. Are you the sort of person who would throw caution to the winds and rush to the call? Are you the kind who'd go away and have a think about it, and come back in a few days if baptism seemed to be the right choice? Or would you go away and think about it, and then find something else had come up and later on, you couldn't quite remember why John's call had seemed so compelling? Or perhaps you're the kind of person who'd avoid the whole thing: public displays of religious fervour are really not my thing. Or then again, perhaps you're dubious about this whole repentance thing: who is John to make me feel bad about myself? My self-esteem doesn't need any more knocks, I'll avoid John, banging on about sins. Or maybe you feel a bit of sympathy towards these religious and political elite,

these vipers – John seems to imply they’re coming without thought for what they’ll need to leave behind, coming without considering the cost of true repentance. Perhaps you’re the scornful one standing at a distance – what superstitious fools these others are.

I think Jesus had cause to feel some of these things. He didn’t need to repent and be washed clean. Unlike the hypocritical pharisees and Sadducees he genuinely was living so close to God that he didn’t sin – he was so aligned to God his father, even separated in this human form, that he was naturally living one hundred percent God’s way.

He could have stood at the side and scoffed, because he was better than the others. He could have avoided the embarrassing public display, because he didn’t need the washing. He could have come to his cousin and explained why it wasn’t necessary, or he could have avoided the whole area.

It took a lot of humility to walk into the river and ask to be baptised like everyone else. He wasn’t doing it for himself, he was doing it to fulfil all righteousness. He was doing it because it set him on a path which he’d follow for the next three years, a path which led to opening eyes and releasing captives, a path of healing and teaching, but also one of challenging and shaking things up.

This path led to the cross, and it led beyond it. It was a path which led to misunderstanding, injustice and agony, and one which Jesus could have avoided, with options to turn away from that path at many points. But Jesus took this first step, into the river, to begin the fulfilment of this prophecy, this path, which led to our freedom.

So it makes me reconsider. I’d definitely be one of those ‘no thank yous’ to the public spectacle of baptism in the river. By nature, I’m one who stands at the side, for public displays. But as Jesus plunged into the river, as he plunged into his ministry of redemption for me and for the world, it makes me think that my standing on the side is not a reasonable response, when God calls me in.

PAUSE

I’ll give you a moment to ponder these things, and then I’ll close with a prayer.

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Lord, whatever my nature, you call me in. You don’t call me to do respond the same way as other people do, you call me the way you made me. Following your call may invite me to step out of my comfort zone, but it’s always a call to become more of my true self, it’s never a call to become someone else. In the power of your Holy Spirit, give me grace and strength to follow your call, knowing that you look at me and say: ‘this is my daughter, this is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’

Amen