Article Side

John the Baptist meets Eminem by David Smith

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This is the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, â€œSee! I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way. He is a voice calling out in the wilderness: â€˜Prepare the way for the Lord! Make his paths straight!â€™â€• John was baptizing in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. People from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were flocking to him, being baptized by him while they confessed their sins. Now John was dressed in camelâ€™s hair with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. He kept proclaiming, â€œThe one who is coming after me is stronger than I am, and I am not worthy to bend down and untie his sandal straps. I baptized you with water, but it is he who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.â€•

Friends, the Yuletide season is upon us!

It seems to me that 2011 only just got going and yet here we are now, well and truly hurtling down the track towards Christmas!

And I suspect that it is slightly different for each of us â€“ the trigger that brings us to that chilling realisation that indeed there are only 21 shopping days left before the furious shredding of gift-wrap begins â€“ but I can tell you that I no longer pay much attention to the department stores, for indeed they would be putting up Christmas decorations at the conclusion of their Easter promotions if they could!

And I no longer judge the seasons by the arrival of Christmas cards from friends, as I find that the first cards are always sent by persons who are not real friends and who donâ€™t really believe in Christmas either (though I wonâ€™t bother mentioning the name of the local politician whose card was the first to arrive on my desk as I suspect that most of you have also already received the same card from the same man)!

No, itâ€™s not the decorations nor the cards that herald the advent of the Christmas season for me, but rather the arrival of that uniquely unhygienic Yuletide figure, John the Baptist, who, courtesy of the lectionary, pushes his way to the front of the Christmas stage each year at about this time, announcing the coming of the Christ.

John is a figure who has always fascinated me: his rugged appearance, his no-nonsense style, and his wonderful disregard for what others thought about him â€“ about the way he looked, about the way he spoke, and about the way he must have smelled.

And this is Johnâ€™s week â€“ the week that for me marks the beginning of the Christmas season. And so I have been quietly pondering the Baptist this week, as I do each year at about this time, and he was very much in the back on my mind last Friday night when Ange and I attended the Eminem concert at the Sydney Football Stadium.

I suspect that most people here already know that I have been an avid Eminem fan for many years, but you might not have known that nearly three months ago, on the occasion Angeâ€™s birthday, I was gracious enough to buy her two tickets to the Eminem concert that took place last Friday night! It was gracious of me as I did not specify who the other ticket was for, and she might have taken her mum, but I was lucky and she took me!

And it occurred to me that night that attending an Eminem concert and attending an event with the

Baptist â€“ there would have been a lot of parallels between the events.

I appreciate that the similarities might be not immediately obvious to some, but both persons are prophetic figures in their own right, and both Eminem and the Baptist are persons who were much maligned and hated by broad sections of the establishment, and, what struck me particularly on the night was that if you had been somewhere back in the bleachers around the Jordan, listening to the Baptist, you would have had trouble hearing what he was saying too!

Moreover, seeing the Baptist would have been a phenomenon, like seeing Eminem was a phenomenon, and Iâ€™m guessing you didnâ€™t go to see the Baptist simply because what he said was unique such that you couldnâ€™t hear a message like that anywhere else, but rather because he was unique, and hearing it all directly from him would have been an experience.

And I imagine that there would have been a lot of noise generated through the towns and villages leading up to one of the Baptistâ€™s appearances, similar to the chit-chat going around our Youth Centre in the lead-up to Eminemâ€™s Sydney appearance.

Is the Baptist appearing by himself or are there some support acts? Are you going? Are all the girls going? Are you telling your parents? My dad says John the Baptist is crazy and should be locked up!

And the problem, of course, with being a phenomenon like this is that the medium often overtakes the message. People get so obsessed with the messenger that the message itself gets lost, and that would have been a real danger, I suspect, for those who followed the Baptist.

It was a big problem for Jesus of course. Read the Gospels and youâ€™ll see that after three years of preaching and teaching what was it that the crowds (and even His own disciples) were expecting of Jesus â€¦? An end to the Roman Occupation!

But ending the Roman occupation was not Jesusâ€™ message, and it wasnâ€™t Johnâ€™s message eith we owe it to John, I think, to spend at least a few minutes today actually focusing on what his message was, and it was a message that Iâ€™d suggest can really be summed up in two words: STOP IT!

I appreciate, of course, that in our Gospel reading these two words are summed up in one word: â€˜repentâ€™, but â€˜repentâ€™ is a peculiarly religious word nowadays and so Iâ€™m opting for a secul STOP IT!

Stop what you are doing and take a good look at yourselves! Stop the greed and the godlessness! Stop the violence and the exploitation! Stop it!

And indeed Johnâ€™s message is captured beautifully, I think, by the cartoon that Bob provided us with on the front of todayâ€™s bulletin sheet, where you see masses of people succumbing to the mind-numbing materialism of the Christmas rush, overladen with useless gifts and tinsel, and there on the other side of a great divide is John crying out to them: â€˜Stop it!â€™

Itâ€™s a very simple message. John didnâ€™t offer any sophisticated analysis of why we do the selfish things we do â€“ â€˜I appreciate that you never would have become a tax-collector had your parents told you that they loved you â€¦â€™ â€“ and thatâ€™s not because there isnâ€™t a place for that. It just wasnâ He was a prophet and not a therapist, and his message was accordingly very simple: Stop it! Stop taking money that youâ€™re not entitled to, stop using your position to exploit people. Just stop it!

I think in many ways that Johnâ€™s role is similar to the role I had the privilege of playing numerous times in introducing the choral performances of the Jubilate Singers that we hosted here at Holy Trinity over many years.

I was not the main event by any means or even a part of the main event, but I had the privilege a number of times of being the person who came out to introduce the main event by telling everyone

to be quiet! I would tell people to stop talking and to focus on what lay ahead. Iâ€™d lay down a few rules, and then Iâ€™d introduce them to â€¦ the Messiah (well â€¦ to Susan the choir-mistress, but she was certainly the closet person we had).

The message, at any rate, is simple, and Johnâ€™s role as the herald to the Messiah is a straightforward one, and while we might find John uncouth and his message offensive, it is a message that we need to hear, perhaps most especially at this time of year as we get caught up in the intrigues of office politics and as we try to work out how to best appease all our relatives with the right invitations and the right presents going to the right people, and as we desperately try to satisfy the market-generated greed that comes to us from the lips of our children â€¦ STOP! Stop and take stock! Stop, for the King is coming and weâ€™re going to have to clean things up a bit before He gets here!

And of course Iâ€™m not pretending that all the evils of this world can suddenly be done away with by a few simple acts of repentance. As I often say, â€˜every complex problem always has a simple answer and itâ€™s always the wrong answerâ€™. Even so, the other side of that coin is that sometimes we like to make out that things are more complicated than they are in order to avoid having to take action.

I remember so many South Africans who used to say to me, â€˜you can never end Apartheid. You donâ€™t understand. Itâ€™s much more complicated than you outsiders realiseâ€™! And of course it wasnâ€™t all complicated. They just had to stop it.

And I was thinking of that when I listened to the presentation about Bethlehem this morning â€“ the prison-like walls around the city, the ongoing process of brutality and humiliation that the people of Bethlehem endure â€“ and Iâ€™m sure that the issues are complicated, and Iâ€™m sure that the tensions between Jews and Palestinians are such that you canâ€™t just tear down the wall and call off the Occupation without all sorts of unforeseen effects, and yet Iâ€™m sure that if the Baptist were around today his message would once again be very straightforward: just stop it! Stop the brutality, stop the injustice. Stop it! Sometimes it is that simple. Sometimes in our own very private affairs and in international affairs too it is a simple case of just stopping it.

Stop it because the king is coming and we need to prepare ourselves for what lies ahead. â€˜Prepare the way for the Lord! Make his paths straight!â€™ â€˜The one who is coming after me is stronger than I am and I am not worthy to bend down and untie his sandal straps. I baptized you with water, but it is he who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.â€™

As many of you will remember, I used to run off copies of my John the Baptist Christmas Greeting card each year at about this time. I havenâ€™t done this for a few years now, as they turned out to be more trouble than they were worth.

I did print off one card for today, which Iâ€™m happy to hand on to the first person who requests it from me after the service.

Itâ€™s the colour version, with the friendly image of the Baptist on the front, who appears to be waving but is actually baptising someone. And on the front it says â€œSeasons Greetings in the words of John the Baptist â€¦â€• and on the inside it has some of the Baptistâ€™s more memorable exhortations:

â€œYou brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits that befit repentance. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.â€• Merry Christmas!

As I say, these cards have been the cause of some trouble in the past. I sent one to the Bishop one year, thinking that heâ€™d appreciate it. He didnâ€™t say anything in response but just looked at me strangely when I asked him later if heâ€™d received it. Iâ€™m thinking I should send him an Eminem Christmas card this year (if I can find one) and keep him guessing.

For the truth is that such cards do not fit easily with the Christmas culture we are familiar with, just

as the sobering message of the Baptist does not fit easily with the smug and self-satisfied airs that we often take on this time of year.

Indeed, it is hard to know where to put the Baptist as we arrange the Nativity scene, with Mary, meek and mild, and the gentle Joseph cradling the baby Jesus, surrounded by pious shepherds and docile animals. And yet the church throughout history has seen fit to ensure that we canâ€™t reach that tender scene without getting past the big hairy man with the stick first â€“ John the Baptizer! That sacred space lies on the other side of an icy-cold dip in the Jordan, where we stop, take stock, and prepare ourselves for what lies ahead.

â€œThe one who is coming after me is stronger than I am, and I am not worthy to bend down and untie his sandal straps. I baptized you with water, but it is he who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.â€•

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Dave's main website a http://www.fatherdave.org is a resource of sermons, fight tips and social commentary. Father Dave's goal is to offer an alternative culture for young people, based on values of courage, integrity, self-discipline and teamwork.

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