

Predictions for the future of the Church of England are dire. So precipitous is the predicted rate of decline that panic now regularly breaks out on the bishops bench. No longer is the coup filled with spineless chickens: now it has headless ones too.

These portent-of-doom predictions are based a little bit on looking at what's happening to every other Christian denomination in the country, where the message is down, down, down going, going, gone! and mostly (Anglicans tending to think themselves superior to other christians) it's caused by somebody drawing a straight line on the church attendance figures graph and reaching the conclusion that in thirty years time the sum total of Anglican worshippers in England will be three. Each in a separate church, doggedly defending their own pew against annexation and of course, not talking to either of the other two. Some things will never change. Thirty years' time: three worshippers. And one hundred and forty bishops. Some things will never change. Now this doomsday scenario might be being overly-pessimistic. After all it's humans (mostly) that trudge through the Church of England's doors and humans are not numbers. Although we are wearily unsurprising in so many ways, we rarely behave in a mathematically predictable way. Of course, that could mean that the party might be over even sooner- 20 years or so- though as usual the drink will have run out long before that. On the more optimistic scenario the Church of England might just keep going till I reach retirement age (though the pension will by that time be 5p a year and as many episcopal blessings as you can stomach). The pessimistic view could well see my current occupation joining the many trades, professions and crafts in the great discontinued line of history; defunct, obsolete and remembered only in historical novels and as a perverse parody dressed up in heritage theme parks. What's that man in the silly dress upposed to be Dad? A vicar I think. Or possibly a serving wench.

Dog catchers and crossing sweepers, court jesters and castellans, cabin boys and coachmen, town criers and torturers, wet nurses and whipping boys, reeves and rectors: soon enough clergy will join the ever expanding list of expired employment, no doubt finding their natural niche in the list somewhere near the mudlarkers, toshers and grubbers, people who survived by retrieving objects of questionable value in the mud of the Thames, London's sewer's and the country's drains respectively. That's where we'd slot in. Each generation has their lost jobs. Nobody could imagine a world without them and then sometimes abruptly but usually slowly and imperceptibly their importance declined and soon there was only a handful and then they were gone and the skills were forgotten, the function of the rôle obscure,

the purpose of the profession the subject of heated academic debate but now lost in the mists of time.

The final demise may be ignominious, but clergy will be joining a long and venerable line of those who have- hopefully- been doing God's work but have eventually found themselves outdated, outmoded and surplus to requirements.

And it all started with John the Baptist. John the Baptist. Cousin of Jesus. Prophet. Preacher in the wilderness. And as the Herald of the Kingdom of God, the man who pretty much invented built-in occupational obsolescence.

Does anybody here work as a Herald? Thought not. Anybody know someone down the pub who does that job? Not even as a gig economy second job at Heralderoo? Of course not. The herald has long since disappeared from the armoury of the careers adviser: a voice from fairy tale and romance, those times when knights rode chargers in tournaments, damsels dropped flouncy lace hankies and wore incredibly silly hats (which may explain why they were always in distress), troubadours sang of chivalrous deeds and royal marriages on the rocks were likely to end up at the executioners block rather than all over the tabloids.

Some of the rôle of the herald- that of acting as official messenger between kings, particularly in war time- has been subsumed into that of the career diplomat; other parts- of being the official messenger now hived off into PR departments, spin doctors and press releases.

From what we know of John the Baptist, it would be difficult to see him fitting comfortably into any of these modern day rôles.

“Ambassador, you're spoiling us! Though these chocolates do have an unusual crunch.”

“That will be the locusts.”

or perhaps

“John, this is great stuff, but I'm not sure we can really call them a 'brood of vipers' in an official press release.”

John the Baptist wouldn't be HR's first choice in the modern communications game. But even when the job of Herald was a career choice many a young person might make, nobody in their right mind would go out and (if you'll forgive the expression) head hunt John the Baptist for the post. I mean, who on earth would ask John the Baptist to be their herald? He's one of the last people on earth you would give that job to do. It'd be like making a dodgy billionaire misogynist racist sociopath with orange skin and an outrageous combover presi...

I mean, just look at him. A herald is supposed to impress with his appearance, to cow with his clothing, to be a reflection of the magnificence of his master.

And John? Despite all the baths that his nickname suggests, here he is unkempt, wild eyed and spittle-mouthed, dressed in animal furs held up with an old belt. Best hold your breath when he's around too.

And then listen to him.

Smooth words and spin, diplomatic courtesies and flattering compliments are the name of this game but John is just spitting out bombast and hyperbole, threats and insults.

Utterly unsuited to the job. John the Baptist is an entirely unconventional herald. He's not there to impress. He's rude. Poorly dressed. And to top it all you won't find him in a palace near you: he's going to all the wrong people: the crowds of hoi polloi, the plebian multitudes.

Yet, though he's a bad fit for the traditional rôle, John the Baptist is indeed the herald of the coming of the Kingdom.

And that's because the Kingdom of God, is like nothing else on earth or heaven.

The poor lifted up, the mighty cast down, the hungry filled, the rich sent away hungry. The meek blessed, the oppressed set free. The despised and the outcast, the second rate and the untouchables given the places of greatest respect; women, sinners, tax collectors, the forgotten and the downtrodden are the aristocracy of this kingdom. Wealth counts for nothing: treasure in heaven the only currency of this realm. The greatest is the lowliest servant, and on the throne sits the Crucified King.

This is the kingdom that has John the Baptist as its herald, this kingdom truly is the world turned upside down; this is the kingdom of God.

Like Samson hero of the Old Testament Judges, John the Baptist was raised as a Nazarite - a sort of proto-monk, ascetic, eschewing drink, self-denying, dedicated to God. Unlike Samson John the Baptist doesn't go out in a blaze of tragic glory; he leaves this earth as Herodias' *plat du jour*, served up as the result of some queasy father / stepdaughter bonding.

It was an undignified end. But then John always knew he would fade out of the picture, taper off and fizzle out rather than explode in incandescent irradiance.

“He must increase, but I must decrease”

That's what John said about Jesus and himself. He, Jesus, will become the greatest and I, John, will trickle off into oblivion.

John wasn't the leader of the band. He wasn't even on the back desk of the second fiddles. He was just the guy who opened the curtains at the beginning. But that was enough. More than enough. That walk on part— soon forgotten as the pace of the gospel drama accelerates— that cameo will still make him one of the greatest of those born of women.

“He must increase, but I must decrease”

With that phrase, John, the first to herald the coming of the Messiah, set the bar for all subsequent followers of Jesus. We must become less, while Jesus becomes more. There may be a message of emphasis there for us in the Church of England worrying about the survival of our institution, a message to focus less on our decrease and more instead on the increase of Christ. And there is a message there from John the Baptist to all the followers of Jesus as he herald's Christ Kingdom.

This is what it is.

It's not about you. It's about him. Let God grow in your lives.