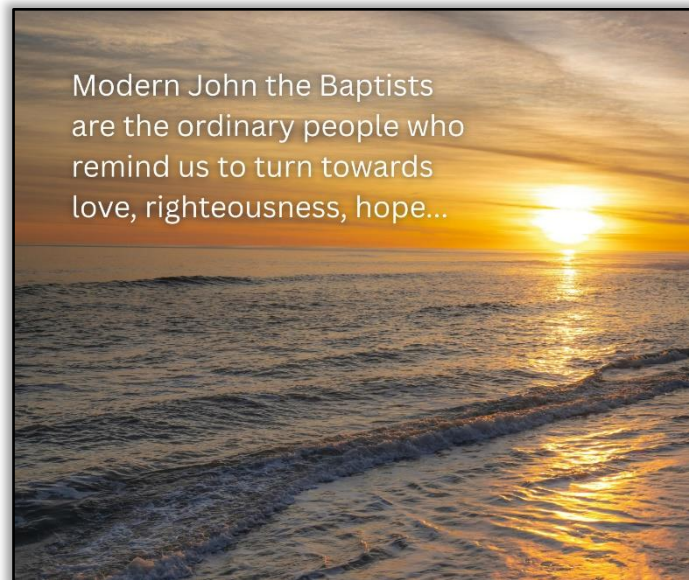


Reflection on Sunday 7 November 2025

by Forbes Mutch, Lay Leader of Worship

Gospel: Matthew 3. 1–12 – John the Baptist

Modern Johns



I first heard the story of John the Baptist when I was six years old. I was at school and I thought: *I like this man; he dresses up as a camel.*

It was coming up to Christmas, it was pantomime time, and I wondered whether John the Baptist was the front legs or the back legs of the camel. My form teacher played along with my mistake and said: *Front legs. In every account, John the Baptist always comes first.* Which doesn't say a lot for where Jesus was in the camel, but we won't go there.

Matthew tells us that John the Baptist was preaching in the wilderness. He stood outside the centre of power. He didn't wear the garments of the temple or feast at the tables of the influential.

Instead, he clothed himself in camel's hair, ate locusts and wild honey, and preached truth from the margins. John was not polished, but he was powerful – not because of his status in society, but because he spoke the truth.

John's message was simple, but it was not easy. He said (and I paraphrase): *Stop. Consider. Turn around. Make the path straight for the Lord.* His call was about alignment – aligning one's life with the movement of God. And that message is as relevant today as it was then.

When we think of prophets, we imagine men and women as ancient figures carved into stained glass. But John the Baptist teaches us that prophets are rarely where we expect them. They show up on the edges. They challenge, disturb and provoke. And in our world today, God continues to inspire 'modern Johns' – voices in the wilderness who call on us to fight for justice, humility and hope.

Who are these modern John the Baptists?

I recently went on a retreat in the visitors' wing of a working convent near Oxford. All the rooms in the residents' wing were named after saints and, I realise now, modern-day John the Baptists; people in history who stuck to their principles and held firm to decent values, often in the face of powerful, sometimes violent, opposition.

I'm sure you can think of some yourself – Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, but also more modern names such as Malala Yousafzai and Greta Thunberg.

These are all high-profile names, but modern John the Baptists can also be less well-known. They are the ordinary people who cry out in boardrooms, or speak quietly in classrooms, or in the pub or around the kitchen table. They remind us in everyday conversations and by their actions that it's important to turn away from the apathy that is engulfing our world, turn towards love, turn from injustice towards righteousness, from self-centeredness towards sacrificial care and, as Alan preached last week, embrace hope.

Has anyone here been listening to the 2025 BBC Reith Lectures by Rutger Bregman, a Dutch historian and philosopher? Titled *A Moral Revolution*, there have only been two so far in a series of four lectures. The first one was called *A Time of Monsters*.

Bregman warns that we are living in an 'age of immorality,' an age of elites and institutions dominated by self-interest, convenience and fear. He argues that our world stands at a crossroads; societies risk being hollowed out by greed, injustice and moral cowardice.

But he also holds on to hope. And hope, as Alan explained last week, hope is about believing in the power of small things, small acts of kindness in everyday life, words of encouragement, acts of resistance.

On the broad stage of world history, Bregman says that it is committed movements that started small – like the slave abolitionists or suffragettes – who have demonstrated again and again how moral change can be achieved, even in the face of powerful opposition.

In today's world, we must not miss the resonance of what John the Baptist said 2,000 years ago. He called people to return to what matters: justice, humility, repentance and a heart turned toward God. Bregman today calls society to a similar reckoning: to reject the emptiness of consumerism, to challenge entrenched perceptions, to awaken moral ambition and rebuild communities rooted in fairness and dignity. Both John the Baptist's and Bregman's voices shake complacency. Both demand courage.

When we look at the papers, listen to the news, find ourselves reading fake stories; when we consider the state of the world, the conflicts and trauma facing millions of people, the self-interested weakness of world leaders, it's easy to think that God has stopped listening to our prayers. But he hasn't. It's more that we have stopped listening to God and the voices of the modern prophets that he sends, the voices in the wilderness.

In the world today and throughout history, it is action that has more impact than words. I came across a prayer the other day. Maybe this is God talking: *I was hungry, and you formed a humanities club to discuss it. I was imprisoned, and you stayed at home to pray for my release. I was naked, and you debated the morality of my appearance. I was sick, and you thanked God for your own health. I was homeless, and you preached to me about getting a job. You seem so holy and so close to me, but I'm*

still hungry, lonely, cold, and in pain. Does it matter to you?' Don't just talk about my love; show it!

Some of us do this already, of course, and I know that this church is filled with people who do good works, who contribute massively to society and communities, who strive every day to create God's kingdom on earth.

But don't let it stop; don't let us become complacent with what we do because we think we do enough and can't make any more of a difference. Instead, let us allow ourselves to be constantly stirred out of comfort. Help us to speak more where we have been silent, to act where we have been passive. It starts with the small things. It starts at home. It starts with everyday conversations, with the emails we write, the text messages we send. It's what John the Baptist would have wanted.

Let's finish with a prayer.

Loving Father, may we hear your voice when you speak to us through modern day John the Baptists. Grant us the boldness and the moral imagination to live out the revolution John called for, under the guidance of your Gospel and the daily power of your spirit. Amen.