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### UNCOUTH, HAIRY INSECTIVORE: JOHN THE BAPTIST St John the Baptist Boldre Patronal Festival



John the Baptist, denizen of the desert, a wild man, a hairy man, an insectivore, gobbling down locusts: healthy food, their barbed, dry, brittle, leggy legs, and rattling wings, providing scratchy roughage enough to balance the oily



protein or their thoraxes and abdomens. Then for dessert the grubs of bees, marinated in their own honey, a sweet, sweet wilderness treat, the best of all tucker, one that delighted wild-eyed Samson once upon a time, when discovered in a lion's carcass, and that brightened the eyes of Jonathan, when found dripping from combs on the forest floor and taken up to his mouth on the haft of his spear.

#### **Anti-establishment fulminator**

John the Baptist, an anti-establishment man, in the uniform of a prophet, likened to the politically dangerous Elijah the Tishbite, King Ahab and Queen Jezebel's nemesis, the "disturber of Israel".

John the Baptist, robed in camel-hair, girdled in leather. A fulminator against evil, a loud man, an outspoken man, an uncouth man, a man of the people, who flocked to him, and therefore a dangerous man: "off with his head, off with his head".

As unlikely a patron saint for this lovely, tranquil, civilized church in its so rural, green, tree-leafy, butter-cupped and daisied, gentle, south of England setting.

John the Baptist. John the Baptist. A coarse patron, for a sophisticated church and so turning patronage upside down and on its head.

A wild, uncouth, poverty-choosing, loud-mouthed, anti-establishment, tell it like it is, brutally executed outsider. And yet the patron of so civilized, lovely, gentle, homely, conservative, decent and comfortable, dear, dear parish church as this. Patronage turned upside down and on its head, indeed.

#### **Pops with paradoxes, sizzles with surprises**

Christianity does that. Topsy-turveys convention. Pops with paradoxes, sizzles with surprises. Puts the first last, the last first, declares the poor blessed, shoves and squeezes the wealthy through the eye of a needle, turns the other cheek, walks the second mile, forgives not once, twice, three times or seven times, but seventy times seven, declares crucifixion a victory, bad Friday, Good Friday, death life, the impossible possible, the fool wise and sacrificing love the ultimate virtue, and life's very *raison d'être*.

Fascinatingly subversive, it subverts even subversion. For there is no ideology, no philosophy, no form of government, school of thought or scheme of life, unchallenged or untroubled by it. It is disturbing, exciting, challenging, life-enhancing and I love it beyond telling for all of that and more.

### **A latter day John the Baptist**

In the early nineteen sixties, my father, founded a Mission Station in Rhodesia and chose as it's patron, John the Baptist. I never asked him why, which I regret.

Though he himself was a bit of a John the Baptist figure. No public school or Oxbridge man, he had a good Derbyshire accent, and had been a trout farmer before training to be a priest.

A great raconteur, he preached anecdotally but pointedly, interestingly, emphatically and well, drawing less upon scholarship than upon daily life out and about among real people.

No lily-white-handed scribe, he could turn his hand to anything. He particularly loved wood work, gardening, rearing and butchering his own pigs and above all else plumbing, considering septic tanks among the greatest of human inventions.

A hairy man, a bearded man, and like John the Baptist, he too headed for the wilderness, for the island of Tristan da Cunha in the wastes of the South Atlantic.

Then on to found St John the Baptist's Mission Station, Chikwaka. Where he was a voice in the wilderness, hope in the bush, He designed and built two houses, refurbished a church, founded an orphanage, and managed about thirty primitive schools in a great 300 mile long swathe of African bush.

Outspoken, often at odds with the Diocesan authorities, he spoke his mind and wasn't afraid to be unpopular. He was nonetheless the real deal, an authentic pointer to Christ, a true disciple.

He was also a baptizer, of course, baptizing no less a person than me in the little church of St Mary the Virgin, Gratwich, Staffordshire.

### **Unlikely visitor to St John the Baptist Boldre**

Coincidentally this man, my father and latter day John the Baptist admirer visited St John the Baptist Boldre, after a manner of speaking at the HMS Hood Memorial Service a couple of weeks ago.

One of the two wreath layers was a Mrs Pratt, who, on seeing the name "Neaum" on the order of service collared me afterwards and we discovered that she had known him as a girl and admired him enormously when he was at Gratwich in Staffordshire.

It was my father's first parish and there he became a lifelong friend of the local squire, who happened to be her step-father, an irascible, attractive fellow called Johnny Congreve, who had a gammy leg from the war, popped the popular little sweets called spangles into his mouth with the paper still on them drove his car without ever using the clutch, because of his gammy leg, and was full of fun.

So, what advice for St John's the Baptist's Boldre on its Patronal Festival would an outspoken and prophetic figure like John the Baptist have to offer, I wonder, or David Neaum his outspoken twentieth century disciple?

### **No platitudinous pap**

One thing is certain, it would be less than platitudinous, comforting or conventional. Indeed it might well go something like this:

“People of St John's Boldre, your church is very, very lovely, an oasis of quietude, tranquillity and peace, and its setting is well nigh perfect.

“In difficult and unbelieving times it actually has a congregation, and a talented congregation, elderly for the most part, but blessedly so, a reservoir and accumulation of experience, wisdom and talent.

“Your worship is lovely, traditional but also lively, traditional, but with spark and perzazz, both conservative and liberal, good to be a part of, a truth affirmed most wonderfully by the Mystery Worshipper from the highly regarded Ship of Fool's website who visited us and rated us so highly shortly after Christmas.

“You are a friendly, supportive congregation, appear really to care for each other and although by no means perfect, approximate quite remarkably to a loving, forgiving community of the sort in which love and compassion, and forgiveness bring peace, wholeness and quietude to troubled lives. It is indeed lovely to be a part of such a place.

“But, but, but.... why are you running so substantial a deficit? Worse, why are you running scared of that deficit? Why are you resenting the amount you are called upon to contribute to the Diocese, instead of being proud that there are such high expectations of you?

“To be credited with so much potential, is possibly an honour. To have more expected of you than most parishes, and with only a part time priest as well is both an honour and an exciting challenge. Could well be a compliment, not an insult.

“Why are you not aiming to be the most selflessly generous of all parishes? Receiving less than most and giving more than most. Walk tall, think big, rise to the challenge.

“The Christian Faith isn't platitudinous pap, isn't a risk-free, safety zone, mean-spirit, narrow-minded and self-serving.

“No, no no, it pops with paradoxes, sizzles with surprises. Puts the first last, the last first, declares the poor blessed, shoves and squeezes the wealthy through the eye of a needle, turns the other cheek, walks the second mile, forgives not once, twice, three times or seven times, but seventy times seven, it declares crucifixion a victory, bad Friday, Good Friday, death life, the impossible possible, the fool wise and sacrificing love to be the ultimate virtue, and life's very *raison d'être*.

“Fascinatingly subversive, it subverts even subversion. For there is no ideology, no philosophy, no form of government, school of thought or scheme of life, that can be unchallenged or untroubled by it. It is disturbing, exciting, challenging, life-enhancing and lovely beyond telling. It is life abundant, a shining, lustrous pearl of great price,

treasure in a field, life's very savour, light in a dark room, a beacon on a hill, the bubble in the bread, a wedding feast, a banquet. Its good news, great news,

### **Rejoice in the best of paradoxical patrons**

“So, rejoice in the footling little challenge posed by our substantial deficit, don't baulk at it, laugh at it, meet it, double it, challenge yourself both as individuals and community over it, dig deep enough to pay it off two or three times over.....”

So would our patron saint advise, perhaps, that splendid wild and hairy denizen of the desert and insectivore, who gobbled down locusts, loving their barbed, dry, brittle, leggy legs, and rattling wings, for being scratchy roughage enough to balance the oily protein or their thoraxes and abdomens. Who enjoyed the grubs of bees, marinated in their own honey, as a sweet, sweet desert treat, the best of all tucker.

John the Baptist, our unlikely patron, our splendid patron, our wild, uncouth, poverty-choosing, loud-mouthed, anti-establishment, tell it like it is, outsider of a patron,.

The very, very, very best of paradoxical patrons for our so civilized, lovely, gentle, homely, conservative, decent and comfortable, dear, dear parish church.

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