

## Advent 3 – Reflection



The Virgin and Child with St Anne and St John the Baptist by Leonardo da Vinci c.1500

How do you imagine John the Baptist, who is the central figure for this third week of Advent? The Bible describes him as a charismatic preacher, shouting forcefully to people in the desert. His appearance is striking – wearing camel hair and a leather belt, and eating locusts and wild honey! (*Matthew 3.4*) But I have chosen a sketch by Leonardo da Vinci which gives a very different image of him; it portrays John as a little boy in a family scene.

Many years ago, when I first saw this sketch by Leonardo, I assumed that the two women were Mary and Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. It seemed natural to assume that the two mothers were meeting together to share the joys of their baby sons. However, I was wrong – the older woman is St Anne, the mother of Mary. The picture shows a loving family scene. Mary is young enough to be sitting on her mother's knee, and Anne is looking at her with love and admiration. It shows the support that Anne gave to her daughter when she was facing censure for becoming pregnant prior to marriage. Anne's left hand is pointing upwards. Leonardo often used this gesture

in his paintings to indicate the presence of God. Mary is focused on the baby Jesus, whose fingers are raised to bless John – another indication of God’s presence in this domestic scene.

Now let us concentrate on John, the person celebrated on this third Sunday of Advent. John is placed to the side in this image, leaning against Anne, but slightly removed from the main figures. He appears independent; he is not being embraced or cuddled. Is this an indication of his future role? John always referred to himself in humble terms as the one who was sent to prepare the way for someone more important, for the Messiah. Is Leonardo indicating that he was preparing for this role even from his boyhood?

John was (and is) such an important figure in God’s preparations for the coming of Christ. He forms the link between the old prophets and the new era. His appearance and preaching echo the great prophets of the Old Testament but he constantly points to the future. The prophet Isaiah foretold that God would send a messenger to prepare the way for the Messiah (*Isaiah 40.3*), and John refers to “the one ... who is coming after me.” (*Mark 1. 1-8*) There are parallels between the lives of John and Jesus: John’s birth, like Jesus’s, was announced by an angel, both of them drew large crowds in their preaching and teaching, and both of them aroused suspicion and fear amongst the authorities. Finally, they both suffered cruel deaths. Throughout all of this John focused on his role as the forerunner of the Messiah; he did not try to steal the limelight for himself.

John seemed to have great confidence in God and in his part in God’s plan until one moment of doubt when he was in prison awaiting death. (*Matthew 11.2-11*) He must have been at his lowest ebb at this point and started to question whether he had completed his task. He sent messengers to Jesus, asking if he was truly the Messiah. Jesus responded by telling the messengers to describe what they saw – the lame walking, the lepers healed, the dead returned to life, and the poor given the good news. Jesus was referring to the prophecies of old, describing the work of the Messiah. He knew that John would recognise this and feel reassured. John’s work was done.

John teaches us so much about a life of service to God, about humility, and about dedication. But it is also reassuring to us that he knew moments of doubt and uncertainty, just as we do. The opposite of doubt is not faith, but certainty. Faith involves believing whilst also living with doubt. Like John, we can take our doubts to God in prayer and seek support in our darker moments.

**Consider:** Are there times when we need to stand aside like John, and let others be the centre of attention? What is the best way to address our doubts and uncertainties? How can we point out the path to God to others?

### **Prayer**

Father of all, send us the Holy Spirit so that we may prepare the way of the Lord Jesus Christ, in our lives and in our world. Teach us to lift our eyes and look with hope for that day when he will return to draw all people to himself. Amen