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# Then and now

Katharine Smith *reflects on* Luke 3:1-6

Luke carefully sets his story in its historical context, referring to local, national and international politics. He makes it clear that Jesus lived in the real world, among real people. He also carefully sets his story in the context of God's dealings with the people of Israel, who now live under the oppression of Rome and an emperor who is worshipped in some places as a god.

The people of Israel long to be set free from fear and oppression, they long for knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins and for the light of a new dawn to shine upon them, guiding them from darkness into the way of peace.

Luke describes how John uses the words of Israel's prophet, Isaiah, to herald the coming

of the one who will answer this longing and to call people to prepare for his appearance among them.

Our world is not so very different. Powerful nations still oppress. Many people of faith live under threat of persecution. Corruption and injustice create inequality among people who are equal in the eyes of God.

We need to hear John's message every bit as much as the people who heard it two thousand years ago. We are not spectators by the banks of the river. We also have a need for repentance, forgiveness and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to prepare us for the return of our Lord so that we shall see the salvation of God. 🌿

Heavenly Father, your prophet John calls us to prepare for your coming among us in Jesus. Give us the grace and humility to acknowledge our need for forgiveness and the strength of your Holy Spirit to guide us in the ways of peace and justice. Amen.

## Keeping Christ in Christmas

### Part 5 – Christmas cards

by Heather Cooke

As part of the usual preparation for Christmas we write cards, often for people we don't see from one year to the next. Sometimes a card is a heartfelt way of reaching out to someone we couldn't otherwise see, and Christmas cards have been all the more important for many in recent years.

Sometimes, though, a card is just the easy way out. God didn't take the easy way out. God didn't rely on written communication but

came in person. God not only gave us the wonderful written words of the Bible, but paid us a very special Christmas visit; the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and still visits us each day.

We can keep the Christ in Christmas this week by looking through our Christmas card list. Rather than just a scribbled signature, could we send news and warm wishes? Could we make a long telephone call? We can certainly visit all those people in prayer.

*"Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing". 🌿*

## John the Baptist

by Caroline Hodgson

John the Baptist is the subject of our Gospel readings today and next Sunday. So let's take a look at the man known as the "forerunner".

Some maintain that John belonged to the Essenes, a semi-ascetic Jewish sect who practised ritual baptism. His ministry drew the attention of many people, some of whom became his disciples. Indeed, in John's Gospel (1:35-40) we read that the first two people Jesus

called as disciples, including Andrew, had initially been followers of John. Jesus himself identified John as "Elijah who is to come" (Matthew 11:14) – a direct reference to the prophecy of Malachi (4:5-6) – "Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes."

John's ministry lasted for about three years until he was imprisoned by Herod Antipas for speaking out against his unlawful marriage. Because of a promise Herod had made to his wife's daughter, Salome, he had John beheaded.

As well as being a major figure in Christianity, he is also a prophet in Islam, the Bahá'í Faith, and Mandaeanism. 🌿

“God has come not to judge the world, but to save it! Do not run away; do not be afraid. God comes unarmed... This tells you that God has come to save you, not lose you; to rescue you, not to imprison you.”

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), abbot and leader in the revitalisation of Benedictine monasticism