

It is a famous sermon by the great Augustine of Hippo which contrasts the birth of John the Baptist with the birth of Jesus:

John born of an old barren woman; Jesus born of a young fruitful maid;

The announcement of John's birth not believed and his father was struck dumb; the announcement of Jesus' birth received with faith and his mother sings for joy.

And it is Augustine who, probably for the first time, emphasises the way in which the author of Luke's Gospel – the Gospels in general – use St John the Baptist as a hinge between the two Testaments.

The OLD WORLD represented by John's father, Zechariah the priest. God' word is no longer heard in the old dispensation and the priests and prophets no longer speak God's word...both God and human praises are silent.

The NEW WORLD, brought about, in a way, by the birth of John the Baptist, is a world in which the WORD leaps down from heaven and enters in creation, the WORD causes John to leap with gladness in his mother's womb and human voices sing for joy and Zechariah announces "His name is John" – that is God is Gracious.

And this is John the Baptists life-long proclamation, a proclamation made through his birth, his life and his death: the gracious God is revealed in Jesus Christ.

I love images – old paintings – of John the Baptist which try to make sense of his weird clothing and diet and which so often depict John with a pointing finger. This act of pointing to the Christ is usually emphasised, as it is by Matthew Grunewald, with an elongated finger ...don't look at me, don't listen to me, LOOK, behold, *there* is the Lamb of God, John says.

It is I guess a danger ever since the days of Augustine for the church, for any church, for every parish church to slip back into the old ways: we can become deaf to the word of God – insulated by our own cares and concerns; we can become silent in our proclamation – hesitant, overcautious, not wanting to offend.

Or worse we can become puffed up with our own sense of importance – especially the CofE: we do state occasions beautifully, we have wonderful music and incredible buildings. How tempting it is to point the finger at ourselves and not the Christ.

Last week and this coming week members of the PCC and a few others who exercise ministry within the parish have been gathering to consider the Leading Your Church into Growth process – something I wrote about in the March edition of the Lance. We have been considering how we at St George’s might grow in numbers, in spiritual

commitment and in our service to the local community and wider world...considering that against the Bishop's strapline "growing church bringing hope".

My hope is that as the months unfold many of us, including our youngsters, will be engaged in shaping the vision and direction of St George's for the coming years.

My caveat to this process even before we begin: we work and pray for the growth of God's Kingdom and not his Church, but as God's People we are called to use our voice and to use our hands:

- To praise and glorify God
- To point people to God and to serve them

Not pointing at or to ourselves, not speaking of St George's as an end in itself so for example:

- ❖ We use the heritage of this fine building
- ❖ We use our musical tradition
- ❖ We use our worship and our liturgy
- ❖ We renew our sense of service to the community

IN ORDER to point out and point to the unconditional love of God which is at the heart of all creation and revealed so clearly in Jesus Christ.