

The gospel stories often leave us with many questions. They tell us that Mary and Elizabeth were cousins and that Elizabeth visited Mary during her pregnancy.

They also inform us that Elizabeth became aware during her visitation that Mary was indeed carrying the Christ Child. The question that is running around in my head therefore is, "Did John know that his cousin Jesus was the chosen one when he began to preach."

Matthew has an account in his gospel 3:13 of Jesus coming to John at the Jordan River seeking baptism. In the exchange John sought to prevent this happening saying "I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?"

The implication is that John recognized that Jesus was the chosen one, the Messiah. The question in my mind is, "How and when did John come to that awareness?"

Had he always know and if so how? Did Elizabeth tell him of her experience and if so when? Did Jesus reveal his destiny to John? Two cousin chatting over coffee, one says to the other in passing: "Oh did you know I am the Messiah!"

Did John have a revelation from God that Jesus was the chosen one? What was his reluctance to baptise Jesus? Was it because he knew of Jesus status? Or was it that he recognized that Jesus had lived a more exemplary life than he and that if anyone was to seek forgiveness it was he, John, and not Jesus that should be the one to do the asking.

The thing about such questions is that we have no way of getting the answer in this life. Which leaves me to think that up until Jesus came for baptism; and John had some form of Epiphany - that John was voicing what had become a not unfamiliar theme among the prophets.

Our Old Testament reading from Malachi reflects some of this thinking. A number of the prophets had proclaimed that the Jewish nation was in exile because of the laxness of the people.

In the foreign land however they had begun to rediscovered their ardour for faith. There was a growing belief that the time was approaching when God would liberate Israel.

Malachi felt that a messenger would come to the people of Israel to assist them prepare for their "day" of liberation. That message is linked for us this morning with John Baptist who heralded the coming of the Messiah.

Clearly the intent is to reinforce John's role as the forerunner to the coming of the Christ and the belief that the Messiah when he came would set Israel free. The people of Israel were no longer slaves in a foreign land but they were under the control of Rome.

For many therefore the Messiah they sought was a military leader who would enable them to banish the occupying forces of the Roman Empire. But that was not the Messiah Jesus turned out to be.

Jesus came proclaiming a very different liberation. A liberation from the bondage of sin. A liberation from fear and enslavement to the rigidity of the law as taught by the scribes and Pharisees. Freedom to love and to receive love.

Sin is not something many choose to dwell on these days and yet we can be just as enslaved by sin as those of John's or Malachi's time. When we give our passions free reign we are likely to harm others as well as ourselves; road rage, child exploitation, domestic violence, bullying and all manner of addictions come to mind.

Many of us and many in the world we live in need to be liberated from sin. We also need to be liberated from fear.

Michael Leunig says that there are only two emotions: love and fear. In our world there is much that many fear. Fear can be our friend preventing us from taking unnecessary risks that endanger our life and wellbeing as well as the lives and wellbeing of others.

We make careful decisions when driving, when crossing the road. We take sensible precautions about how we live: the use of electricity, climbing and descending stairs, avoiding trip hazards in the home and so forth, because we are afraid of what might happen if we don't.

But fear can paralyse us. It can prevent us from establishing relationships with people because of their size, their skin colour, their ethnicity, their religion, their behaviour, their disability, their gender or sexual orientation.

Many in our society are overwhelmed by fear. To prepare ourselves for the coming of the Lord we need to cast out fear. Only love casts out fear. To

cast our fear we embrace love. The love of God, the love of self, the love of the other.

Many also are imprisoned by rigidity. The scribes and the Pharisees burdened the Jewish people with many regulations that were designed to detail the extent of the law handed down by Moses.

Its real intent was to limit the impact of the law so that the law was seen to apply to this but not that and establish a powerful elite who knew and controlled the law and were therefore able to exercise control over others.

Jesus was not for being caught up in silly pedantic games: which is the greatest law and the like and the attempts of the scribes and the Pharisees to trap him into criticizing the law and or catch him breaking the law.

What Jesus was able to show time and time again was that in loving God and loving others he

fulfilled the law. Those who purported to be upholders of the law on the other hand regularly transgressed the law.

We can develop rigid mindsets about all manner of things and assume that because we believe something should be done in a particular way that that is how God would want it done. It can be about the programs we view on television, the way people dress, the way others drive their cars, who comes to Australia, the hymns we sing, even where we sit in church.

Such rigidity is not of God. It is a falsehood, an idol that replaces the true God. The God of love sent Jesus into the world to liberate humankind from enslavement to the rigid mindset that seeks to control others.

Many believe the recent acts of terror are perpetrated by rigid thinking religious fanatics while failing to acknowledge their own rigidity. Now I'm not trying to draw a parallel

between a preference for classical music over rap for example, with the massacre of innocent people. But Jesus warned about the tendency to want to remove the splinter from the other's eye while ignoring the plank in our own.

Are we guilty of a lack of love? Are we afraid of others? Do we make judgements about them based on their appearance; their size, skin colour, ethnicity, religion, behaviour, disability, gender or sexual orientation?

Are we imprisoned by rigid thinking and find it hard to tolerate those who think differently from us. Jesus challenged the people of his day to stop trying to limit the power of God with regulation upon regulation and to rather see the abundance of God's love for the whole of creation.

Do we have the capacity to cast aside our bondage to sin? To be liberated from fear and enslavement to the rigidity of the law? Do we crave freedom to love and to receive love? In other words are we

ready to prepare the way for the Lord to enter our lives in a new way?

John proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins in heralding the coming of the Lord. We are encouraged to prepare for the coming of the Lord into our lives by casting out our inability to control our passions, our fears and our rigidity and embrace the love of God.

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