

Luke is very precise about the timing of the coming of John the Baptist. He sets this event within the political and religious framework of the day. Why so much information?

Presumably because the exact date was not known, but by giving all these pieces it is possible to narrow it down to two or three years. The one peculiarity is that according to the historian Josephus, the High Priest Annas was deposed by Pilate's predecessor and replaced by his son-in-law Caiaphas in AD 18. They were certainly not both High Priests at the same time.

The second question is why did John the Baptist appear at that time, rather than any other time? What was going on politically?

Tacitus, the historian, described Tiberius in the following way:

*he was a compound of good and evil; he was infamous for his cruelty, though he veiled his debaucheries. Finally, he plunged into every wickedness and disgrace, when fear and shame being cast off, he simply indulged his own inclinations.*

Not a great advert for absolute authority!

What of Pilate? Ancient Jewish writers [Philo](#) and [Josephus](#) both report that Pilate repeatedly caused near-insurrections among the Jews because of his insensitivity to Jewish customs. Hardly the man to create harmony and peace.

Herod Antipas, described by Jesus as that fox, was the ultimate politician. He courted favour with the Romans, believing that this would give him more power.

So we have all the possible abuses and misuses of power.

What of the religious ruler? Not much is known of Caiaphas from sources outside the bible, but in the bible he is considered the chief conspirator against Jesus, concerned more about keeping in with the Romans so that the Temple practices could continue, than with care for the people.

You might say that the political and religious situation was not unusual, and indeed there have been many periods in history where law has been governed by self-interest, in fact it is quite hard to think of a period where this was not true. Yet it was at this particular point in history, one of the many possible points where greed and thirst for power and personal satisfaction trumped responsibility and duty, that John the Baptist arrived proclaiming a baptism of repentance and forgiveness, and

foretelling what would happen when the values of God's Kingdom, of eternity, broke through into our time.

Jesus, the eternal word, was the one who blew apart our neat sense of linear time. Suddenly all people, Abraham, Moses, Judas, those yet to come, are all present, all come face to face with God. There is only now, this moment, and what we do now matters.

And yet it can feel as though the opening between heaven and earth created by Christ has closed or is so tiny that we can no longer feel that sense of the closeness of the kingdom. The disciples, after the death of Christ, were convinced that the end of the world was imminent. Their sense of eternity was greater than their sense of the temporal world. For them repentance and forgiveness were paramount. They literally went to the ends of the earth trying to convince people of the love of God, of the necessity of living the kingdom values, those words that so easily trip off the tongue and yet are so hard to live – justice, freedom, compassion, charity, peace, love.

Over the past few weeks we have become increasingly aware of the fragility of peace. We have seen that some of those who commit atrocities in the name of religion have been drug users and had similar sexual morals to Tiberias. Countries are afraid and having to own up to the fact that they have not worked together because they were even more afraid of giving away information and losing what little power they had. Governments have made decisions based upon not disrupting trade or fuel supplies, switching allies as politically expedient, rather than working together to protect the weakest and the poorest. Weakness and self-interest have allowed evil to flourish.

How do we take hold of the edges of that tear made in our timeline and pull them apart so that we can see eternity more clearly? How do we gain the inner steel that helps us to stand up for what is right? How do we manage to do something more constructive than posting a message on Twitter or going on a march?

First we remove the beam from our own eye. We put our own house in order. We bite our tongue when we are about to say something judgmental, we try to be that bit more generous, when someone upsets us we look for the good in them, but we also are brave enough to tell someone when we think they are going on a wrong path – tell them, face to face, not talk about it to someone else.

This is the way that Jesus came to bring change. He did not smite Herod or Pilate or Tiberias. He persuaded people one by one to change. That is not to say that we do not pray for our politicians and pray for a political solution to the violence and suffering. But we have to create a climate in

society where self-interest is just not tolerated, a society where the vision of justice and compassion is illuminated brightly.

In Advent it is traditional to think about the four last things, death, judgment, heaven and hell. I would put it another way. Think about eternity. What would you like it to be like? Isaiah foretold that all flesh should see the salvation of God. John the Baptist urged people in the wilderness, and urges us, to act now. We are Christ's disciples on earth now. What we do matters. Amen.