



Right-hand panel of folding icon: Russian, 19th Century

“Prepare the way of the Lord!” Mark 1.3b

Here is the striking figure of John the Baptist. Bearded and long-haired, he wears thick animal pelts round his upper body, belted at the waist with a plain strip of leather. This is the right-hand panel of a folding Russian icon fashioned with loving skill in bronze and enamel.

And rather wonderfully, the photo includes the hinge connecting this panel with the one next to it. Why the excitement about a hinge? Because it brings to mind a word – almost a nickname – used by early commentators when talking about John. The word was ‘fibula’, the Latin for the sort of buckle secured by clipping together two halves to form a hinge. And this nickname highlights the hinge John himself formed between the old and the new order of things. The last prophet: the first saint. John the fibula lived in the in-between times between before and after.

Before and after what? John’s pointing finger in the icon leaves us in no doubt. The last in a long line of those who have waited for God’s Messiah, John’s job is to share the divine tidings that this Messiah is at last about to take the stage. (Notice his wings: like Gabriel, John is God’s go-between.) The principle task of this ‘Angel of the Desert’, as John is sometimes known, is to ready us for this news. “Prepare!”

Like John, we also seem to be inhabiting in-between, hinge times. Poised between a pre-Covid and a post-Covid world, we wonder how it will be, how we should prepare...

Wilderness is our experience as it was for John. Uncertainty and disappointment might lie ahead as they did for him... So his message to us flies across the centuries: “Turn things right round: simplify your lives, strive for justice. And keep pointing at Jesus.”

“If you are so weary with the struggle of living that you have no strength even to want God, yet are still dissatisfied that you don’t, you are already keeping Advent in your life.”

Maria Boulding

Prayer

**Jesus our Messiah,
from a flawed past,
lead us to a new future
with you at its heart.
Amen**