

John the Baptist had a lustrous pedigree: his cousin was the Saviour of the World, his uncle was God, his aunt was the Virgin Mary and his step-uncle was St Joseph. Quite a family. But despite all this, Jesus said: 'Of all the men born of women, John the Baptist is the greatest; yet he is the least in the kingdom of heaven'.

What does the figure of John the Baptist say to us?

1. His call from God was particular and individual. Therefore, we are all called by God in a particular and individual way. We are called as we are, warts and all; we don't have to get ourselves pious or holy or shining white first – that would be impossible for me.
2. Cardinal Newman said: "God has created me to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to any other. I have my mission. I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next..." In the end, John the Baptist lost his head, but he never lost this kind of trust in the Lord.
3. All we can ever be is an indicator of something greater than ourselves. Buddha once said: 'I am only a finger pointing at the moon; don't look at me, look at the moon.' John the Baptist said the same thing of Jesus: "Don't look at me, look at him."

4. John the Baptist encourages us to check which direction we're taking in life. I was once being driven by my brother on the M5 towards London on a dark and rainy night when we saw looming up a great warning in flashing lights that said, nerve-wrackingly: 'Danger: Oncoming Vehicle' – that is, oncoming on *our* side of the motorway. Talk about going in the wrong direction. When John the Baptist called for the people to repent and be baptised, he was warning them that *they* were going in the wrong direction... heading away from Christ. That's why he always points to his cousin.
  
5. John the Baptist teaches us that there's nothing wrong with being a forerunner – of being the warm-up act, if you like. Preparing the way for someone whose star is brighter. It's an honourable calling. I think pope John Paul the first was called to be a forerunner for Pope John Paul II. It wouldn't have been comfortable going from the shadowy melancholy of Paul VI's last years straight to the strength and vibrancy of John Paul II. You have to have a in-betweener – someone who can prepare the way for another era, a different personality, a new order.

In-between ages and warm-up times and preparing for a new time, a new age to come, are usually troubled and chaotic and

uncertain. This is a time which the world of the Church is going through now. But we shouldn't be afraid. That is the most frequent phrase on Jesus' lips: 'Do not be afraid.' In this time, we are all called to prepare the way, wherever we may be; we are all called to point a finger at the moon. In whatever way we can – and there is a way for each one of us - we are all called to be John the Baptist.