

Sunday 19 June 2022: St John; A First Responder

A sermon preached by the Dean of Melbourne, the Very Revd Andreas Loewe, at St Paul's Cathedral, on The Birth of John the Baptist

Readings: [Isaiah 49.1-6](#); [Acts 13.16-26](#); [Luke 1.57-66, 80](#)

This is one of the safest services of the year, with so many first responders in the congregation. And you'll be glad to know that, during the past ten years that I have been attending this service, we have not had any medical emergencies at any Order of St John celebrations. And even if that trend should not continue, I am sure that, were there need, there'd be many who are prepared and trained to make sure that we are safe.

Saving lives is what St John is all about. It's a privilege to share in celebrating the incredible commitment and expertise that each one of you brings here today. The recent awards and investiture ceremonies give a glimpse into what your commitment to saving lives looks like. Many thousands of volunteer hours spent teaching people first aid skills, training cadets, supervising and coordinating first responders at large-scale events and, on top of it all, maintaining the ambulance pool, administering the affairs of HQ and the Order, catering for St John Youth Camps, and all the other things that build up community across the brigades. Thank you for your gift of skills and self in service of your fellows. We give thanks to God for all you do to save lives.

There will be many different reasons why members of St John's have chosen to volunteer as first aiders, ambulance drivers, patient transport coordinators, supervisors, teachers and leaders. But the most fundamental one, surely, is this: a profound regard for our fellows, and a personal response to the invitation to help others not only survive, but thrive. Saving lives through first aid includes delivering mental health first aid courses, and I know how much our the Cathedral's leadership and operational teams have benefitted from your training. By enabling others to share in learning your skills—both by training as first aid responders, and as first mental health responders—your work has a reach that far exceeds the thousands of volunteers that serve St John across our State. Your teaching people like our vergers and me means that we, too, gain greater confidence in sharing with you in saving lives. You are people who prepare others to take on the work of saving lives.

Preparing people to save lives is what unites the two parts of the Order's work. Our motto, For the Faith and for the Service of Humankind, shows that there is a spiritual dimension to your work of saving lives. Your service of humankind, which led many of you to share in the work of the Order, is shown in the work of saving lives on earth. Your service of faith is reflected in the work of saving lives for heaven. The work of salvation that the Order of St John lives out is for the here and now and for the hereafter. And both parts of our work require rigorous training. In the same way in which it takes time to train to save lives on earth—by our first aid training, our care in making sure accreditations are up to date, and our

understanding, say, of CPR is current—so it takes time to train in preparing others to save lives for heaven. We are called to do both: to ensure people are given the skills to be saved from danger and harm here on earth, and to ensure that people are given the skills to be saved for Christ forever. We are to be first responders of salvation—physical and spiritual.

Our patron, St John the Baptist, whose birth we celebrate this week, models well what it means to undertake the work of saving lives. Before he began his work, John spent time to train himself for his task. He lived ‘in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel’, we read in his story from Luke’s gospel. During that time, John cut himself off from others so that he could spend time alone, in the presence of God. He embraced an ascetic life, cutting out any distractions, and lived off the land, taking only what was needed—a little protein and sugar were his diet: locusts and wild honey. His garments were made from the camel’s wool, leather sandals and a belt completed his uniform. John left behind the city of Jerusalem, where his parents Zechariah and Elizabeth served at the Temple, and lived in the desert of Judea. We don’t know how exactly John spent his days in preparing for his role as a spiritual first responder. But we do know that his training was extremely effective: from the time that he appeared publicly, he called countless people to a new way of living with God, by inviting them to be washed from what held them back from God, and to reorient their lives completely.

John the Baptist knew that he was called to be a first responder. He would tell people again and again that his job was to provide an immediate intervention that would help people be saved for now—not the permanent cure that they needed. Much in the same way in which any first responder acts today, John’s work was to make sure folks were kept as well as they could be until they were saved forever. When asked about his task, he told his questioners that he was there to prepare folks for the arrival of the ‘One who comes after me’—Jesus. That his calling people to change their lives, that his washing away the things that stood between them and God was the first aid that would tide them over until the arrival of the One who would bring the saving health that was forever, Jesus Christ, who would give his life so that all might live.

I give thanks for first responders like you, who save people’s lives through first aid. Your voluntary service, your training of others, and your dedication save countless lives each year. Just as I give thanks for first responders like John the Baptist, and the many who have followed in his footsteps in pointing others to Jesus as the source of our eternal salvation. People like our Bible study leaders who help others learn about Jesus’ promise that all who turn to him and follow in his way, will be saved. People like our prayer leaders, who model for others how we might deepen our personal connection with God and so sustain our spiritual health. People like our small group leaders who train the next generation of leaders. And people like our clergy, including your Chaplains, who take responsibility for coordinating the ongoing spiritual care for those entrusted to their cure.

To those of you who serve as part of St John, thank you for being a first responder in service of humankind. And to those of you who serve as part of the wider church, thank you for being a first responder in the service of the faith. Both are needed, the founders of the Order of St John knew, so that people's lives may be saved forever. Both need people who will give their gifts of service and self, so that the work of saving lives may continue. Today is a great opportunity to find out about the challenges and joys that serving others and serving God can bring. And so I'd encourage you to talk to another after our worship: those who'd like to find out more about saving lives as first responders through first aid should talk to the people in St John's uniform. And those who'd like to find out more about saving lives as first responders for Christ, should talk to the people in clergy uniforms. Because it is when we work together, as physical and spiritual first responders, that we can save lives for now and for eternity.

As we celebrate our shared service in saving lives, we pray that God would gift us continually all we need to enter into his service; that God would keep us safe in times of danger; that God would support us in times of doubt and hardship; that God would comfort us in times of grief and disappointment. And as we pray God's blessing on ourselves, we ask that God would bless the work we do in his name, and bless those entrusted to our care—the patient in need of first aid; the visitor in need of spiritual counsel; those for whom we have training responsibilities; those over whom we have oversight. And finally, we pray for those who lead us and enable us in our tasks; we give thanks for those who have completed their service, those who have entered into the eternal salvation that is promised to all who have heard and heeded the invitation of John the Baptist to follow after Christ. Thanks be to God.