

*One of the first signs of a saint may well be the fact that other people do not know what to make of him. In fact they are not sure whether he is crazy or only proud but it must at least be pride to be haunted by some individual ideal which nobody but God really comprehends. And he has inescapable difficulties in applying all the abstract norms of 'perfection' to his own life. He cannot seem to make his life fit in with books. (Thomas Merton: *Seeds of Contemplation*.)*

Of course, later we do attempt to fit such lives to the books - the noble art of hagiography but also the long practised art of theology and for the Jews of 'pesher': interpreting present events in the light of the past. In short, we are pattern-making creatures attempting to understand our own pattern in the light of others. We can hear Thomas Merton at work trying to understand himself and no doubt this is what is going on here for me.

Where does that leave us with John the Baptist? Perhaps with the idea that, as the immediate precursor to Christ, he is closer to the true pattern of our lives in Christ than anyone had been before him, with all the puzzlement that left for him and those around him, and the need for history to be the final arbiter of his fortunes – that is, to see where he truly fits in: a man at odds with his times and yet prophetic of their place in history. A man in the wilderness, both real and metaphorically; all over the place in one sense and yet, with hindsight, making a straight path for the Lord. A man not so unlike us after all – or so we can hope.

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