

## John the Baptist 1

*"A voice of one calling in the wilderness,  
'Prepare the way for the Lord,  
make straight paths for him.  
<sup>5</sup> Every valley shall be filled in,  
every mountain and hill made low.  
The crooked roads shall become straight,  
the rough ways smooth.  
<sup>6</sup> And all people will see God's salvation.'*

Due to the strange workings of our service plan, I'm down to preach on all the next three Sunday mornings... then not again until January! So this morning I'm slightly anticipating the beginning of Advent (by one week) and starting a three part mini-series on John the Baptist as he is presented to us in Luke Chapter 3. I plan to circle round the account of John's ministry there, a bit like a vulture, hopefully going a little deeper each time.

Two years ago, I did an Advent series on Luke Chapter 1, which then became this little resource (*Advent with Luke*). As a modest Brit, I always hesitate to recommend my own material, but I happen to think this is 'acceptable' and is a helpful basis for personal study during Advent. It also provides useful background to this year's series, as it deals with the circumstances surrounding the birth of John. We've printed a few off, and I can email you an electronic copy if you'd like one... and we can print more next week if required.

So we're going to spend the next three Sundays in the company of John the Baptist and always in the back of mind will be this question: *what would John be saying to us if he were here today?* If a bearded, unwashed figure in smelly camel-hair, with a half-chewed locust hanging from the corner of his mouth, walked into church this morning, what might his message to us be?! In one sense, it's a foolish question because John's ministry was completely determined by his historical context – the unique moment he occupied when the Old Testament was coming to an end and God's long-promised Saviour was about to step onto the stage of history. On the other hand, there are universal themes in his preaching which should be able to speak to our situation today.

So behind this series is the difficult and disturbing question: *what would John have to say in the context of our issues: for instance, the march of militant Islam, the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, global warming, world inequality, LGBT rights, pro-life versus pro-choice, alarming mental health statistics, Putin's Russia, Trump's America and dare I mention it... Brexit Britain?!* I suspect that's going to cause me a bit of heart-searching because they're not easy questions, particularly as I seem to have been blessed with the ability to see both sides of most issues. But maybe we can go on that journey together – and try to hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to us through this wild man of the desert who, in spite of the brevity of his ministry, Jesus called the greatest of all the Prophets.

John's context was not totally dissimilar to ours: political turmoil and moral and spiritual decline. Luke begins, as he did the previous chapter, anchoring his account in time and place, by name-checking a list of political and religious leaders. Some of the names are familiar, but we've moved on a generation. There's still a Caesar, but now it is Tiberius, not Augustus. And there's still a Herod, but it's the son of the one the Wise Men visited, who later tried to kill Jesus by slaughtering the innocents: Herod Antipas, not Herod the Great.

What's clear, though, is that none of these rulers are an improvement on their predecessors – if anything, things have got even worse in the thirty years or so since the birth of John and Jesus. They represent, at best, an unfeeling Roman domination and, at worst, total moral and political degeneracy. The High Priests Annas and Caiaphas are also mentioned, but as we soon discover, they were also far from being the spiritual leaders Israel needed. The nation was not in a good place and not far beneath the surface seethed discontent and potentially disastrous revolt. Some clear similarities to the world today.

In that context, Luke tells us, John received a message from God in the desert and toured the Jordan region preaching *a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*. There are basically two sides to John's message. On the one hand it's a stern call to individual and national repentance. In that sense, he's every bit an Old Testament Prophet and a spiritual reformer. On the other hand, there's amazing good news. God is coming; prepare the way; straighten the crooked, smooth the rough, level the hills, fill the valleys. It sounds like a modern transport construction project, building a motorway or even an airport – a landing strip for God to touch down. *All people will see God's salvation!*

Those two sides are still evident in the church today – particularly among those who are into the prophetic. Some emphasise the amazing things God is about to do; others stress that repentance is needed to prepare his way. Where you place the balance between those two things determines the stance you will take on a whole range of issues. I have perhaps tended towards the former emphasis – on the coming move of God and the blessings it will bring. Others are more inclined toward an awareness of the perilous state of church and nation and the judgment (or pruning) that may have to precede revival. Probably the truth is that we need both – a bracing call to repentance *and* the assurance of God's good plans in and beyond short-term judgment.

So what does Luke mean by the phrase: *a baptism of repentance*? In those times, baptism was part of the means by which non-Jews could convert to Judaism and be admitted into God's people as proselytes or 'God-fearers'. However, John is preaching to the Jewish people saying *'you need to be baptized too'*. In effect, he was saying, *at present you're no better than the Gentiles, you need to get right with God just as much as they do*. He was pointing out the moral and spiritual bankruptcy of the nation and calling them individually and corporately to repentance.

To be honest, I have quite a lot of negative emotional baggage around the word repentance. Somewhere along the line, I picked up the idea that repentance is all about feeling bad, that you need to become really miserable and depressed in order for God to forgive you. Anyone who has experienced depression or anxiety will understand why I have serious reservations about that view. Depression is a totally destructive state of the mind and emotions which sucks hope and energy out of people. It doesn't lead to a changed life, but is more likely to send us on a downward spiral into hopeless inertia. It's an illness brought on by a chemical imbalance in the brain, stress or experiences of devastating loss, trauma or emotional pain. It's a very real condition causing real suffering and it can't just be snapped out of, got over or pulled together!

Whatever *repentance* is, it's not depression! In fact, the Greek word *Metanoia* is not primarily to do with how you feel, as with how you think and behave. It translates as a change of mind (we might say *change of mindset*), a change in direction (a 180 degree turnaround) or a change of life (how we act). Message translates it: *a baptism of life-change*. It's a positive change for the better. I can get on much better with that. We all change our minds sometimes – any sensible person would... when we realise we've been wrong about something. We all want to change the way we're living from time to time... when we see the way we've been doing things this far isn't working. I'm not denying that there may be an emotional element to repentance, but that isn't the main point. What are the signs of genuine, Biblical, repentance?

1. There must be **a sincere change of heart**. I quite often catch trains home from places I've walked to like Freshford or Avoncliff. So I've got quite used to hearing a recorded message which says, '*Great Western Railways regrets this late running and apologises for the inconvenience caused*'. Somehow I'm never convinced their repentance is sincere – particularly as it was pre-recorded!

2. It must **result in action**. Genuine repentance is seen in a changed life. If the next few times, I go to catch a train I find they are now running on time, then I may start to believe their apology was sincere after all! John told the people to, '*Bear fruit in keeping with repentance*'. There must be actions to back it up.

3. Specifically, there will be an element of **social justice**. This comes out clearly in John's teaching about sharing ones resources with the poor and refraining from exploitation, robbery and false accusation. The repentance John has in mind results in doing something about injustice for the lost, least and broken.

Does that feel overwhelming? *There's so much need in society, where can I begin?* Maybe you've tried to help a homeless person or someone with an addiction or mental health problems and discovered it was more complicated than you thought it would be. Maybe you've had your fingers burned and are wary of trying again. Trying to do something about the vast and complicated needs of our society can feel daunting... if we forget two things:

1. As Christy Wimber helpfully says, **'We're not called to fix people; we're called to love them'**. We can't always solve people's problems, but we can be there for them and walk alongside them. We sometimes fall into a Messiah complex, thinking it's up to us to put everything right. There are some things only God can put right... but we can always show kindness and love. A preacher once said; *'There's good news and then there's very good news. The good news is that there's a Messiah. The very good news is that it isn't you!'*
2. The other thing we forget is that **God has a church**. No individual can do it all, but together we can do a lot. Trying to meet every need you come across single-handedly is the way to a nervous breakdown! But we can all play a part. That's why I love the way CATA brings Christians together in Trowbridge to respond to local needs – through Storehouse Foodbank the Soup Run, Breakthrough homeless drop in, Street Pastors and so on. We're all different but can get involved where our God-given abilities, resources and personalities lead. What do you feel passionate about? Homeless? Refugee/Asylum Seekers? Mental Health? Healing ministry? Young people? Chances are that's where God wants you to be involved.

Advent, along with Lent, is traditionally one of the seasons when we are encouraged to focus on repentance. That doesn't mean beating yourself up, feeling bad or sinking into depression. It's about positive changes in the way we think, act and live. So how might God want us to change? What would John the Baptist say if he was here? What would repentance on behalf of the nation or the church look like? And how does that relate to the political turmoil and spiritual malaise of our day – issues like *militant Islam, the Israeli/Palestinian situation, global warming, world inequality, LGBT rights, pro-choice versus pro-life, alarming mental health statistics, Putin's Russia, Trump's America and Brexit Britain?* Those are the challenging questions I hope John the Baptist will help us to explore.

To get us started we're going to use David's great prayer of repentance, Psalm 51, which is on the Advent Prayer cards. David was confessing a very specific sin (which may be where some of us are today too) but it can also apply to the more general individual and corporate repentance I've been speaking about.

### **To Discuss (Luke 3:1-9):**

1. What would concern John the Baptist most about Britain today?
2. Does the word 'repent' have positive or negative emotional undertones for you? What does *repentance* really mean?
3. How is God calling you to care for *'the lost, the least, and the broken'* in society? Does that feel daunting or exciting?
4. How do Christy Wimber's words, *'We're not called to fix people; we're called to love them'*, apply in practice?