

## John the Baptist 2

This is the second of a three part look at John the Baptist as portrayed in Luke Chapter 3. Why a series on John the Baptist at this time? For three reasons:

1. **Seasonal.** Today is Advent Sunday and the ministry of John the Baptist is one of the major themes of Advent and will be represented by the third candle on our Advent Wreath (when it has one!)
2. **Personal.** Two years ago, I preached a series on Luke Chapters 1 and 2 during Advent and Christmas, some of which then appeared in this little booklet called *'Advent with Luke'* which goes through Chapter 1 in five chunks with a bonus chapter on the Science Fiction film *Arrival*. There are some copies at the back or we can send you it electronically... So it makes sense for me to move on to Luke Ch. 3, which is all about John.
3. **Topical** (and most important). Because we are at a moment of great political uncertainty and peril. I don't remember a time like this when many politicians are openly saying they have no idea what's going to happen next... or even what they think ought to happen! Worrying...

John spoke at a time when the future of his nation Israel looked very uncertain too. Decades of Roman domination had demoralized the people and anger was seething dangerously under the surface ready to explode in potentially disastrous revolution. The religious leadership was compromised and unable to give a clear lead. And in some quarters personal morality was at a low ebb. I'm not saying it's an exact parallel by any means, but there are similarities.

As we saw last week, John erupted into that context with a dual message of judgment (a call to repentance) and Good News (the imminent coming of the Messiah) and the question at the back of my mind throughout is: *how do John's mission and message speak into our situation?* Or as I put it last week:

*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 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?!*

Let's look at the two sides of John's message. First his **call to repentance**. We said last time that repentance is primarily about a change of mind, rather than feeling bad, and that it means a 180 degree turnaround, evidenced by changed actions and ways of living. John preached a *'baptism of life change'* as the Message puts it. Luke quotes three examples of encounters between John and different sections of the community. He tells ordinary people to share their material possessions, the 'haves' with the 'have nots'. *If you've got two coats, give one away*. Then he tells tax collectors and soldiers not to take advantage of their

position to extort money from the people. In other words, repentance here means turning away from financial greed and abuse of power. How might that speak to Britain in 2018? Where is material greed or abuse of privileged position causing others to suffer injustice? In the annoying way of preachers, I'm going to leave those questions hanging in the air for you to answer!

One of the criticisms levelled at Christians is that when we talk about morality, we immediately think of sex. As we've just seen, John the Baptist's main moral emphasis was on economic and social justice, but he does also have something to say about personal sexual morality. He boldly confronts Herod the Tetrarch who, basically, had stolen his brother's wife. John condemns this both because it's wrong in itself but also because, as a ruler, Herod should be setting a better example. So where, in the minefield of 21<sup>st</sup> century sexual mores and gender politics are the clear lines of right and wrong? That's difficult, but clearly the Bible and Christian tradition have things to say on these issues.

As part of the background to this series, I've been reading this book, *'The Reshaping of Britain'* by Clifford Hill. It's a pretty challenging read – I'm only half way through at the moment but hope to have finished by next week, so I'd better be careful what I say. I agree with most of what he writes... and fairly strongly disagree with one or two things! His basic thesis is that much of the decline of Christian belief and morality in Britain over the last fifty years could have been halted if Christians had been bolder and more united in standing out against it. And he lays the responsibility for what he sees as the loss of the Christian underpinning of our society firmly at the door of the leaders of the Churches – for being weak and divided, and for not giving a clear Biblical voice in the nation or leading the church in evangelism. Ouch. Like any 'what might have been' scenario, there's no way of knowing whether he's right, or if the massive social changes of the last half century would have been unstoppable whatever we'd done. But it's certainly not a comfortable proposition.

Whether or not I find I agree with him by the time I finish the book, Clifford Hill reminds me a lot of John the Baptist. He's extremely outspoken, names names, calls out moral and spiritual failure where he sees it, and is not afraid to make enemies in the process. Even if not everything he says is fair, the only response to something like this is what Paul calls *'godly sorrow'*... or repentance.

So what about the current 'state of the nation'? Clearly we are facing a major political crisis over Brexit and my heart goes out to the Prime Minister (whether you agree with her or not) as she bravely tries to steer us through the morass; there are complex social and economic issues giving rise to concerns about gun and knife crime on our streets; there is equal concern about the rising incidence of mental health problems especially afflicting the young... and none of the difficult issues around the environment, poverty, same-sex marriage and abortion show any sign of getting easier! The sheer complexity of modern problems often makes it hard for us to give definitive answers.

But there are two things I do personally feel totally sure about (and I think both John the Baptist and Clifford Hill would agree). Firstly, that the root of our problems is not political,

social, economic, or even moral... but spiritual. The most serious problem we face is a loss of connection to God, personally and collectively, which is making all those other factors harder to navigate. The clear message of John for our times is that we need to return to God and his ways. That begins with recognizing the need for a personal relationship with God through Jesus; admitting there is something fundamentally wrong with human beings that we can't fix ourselves... and turning to Christ.

But if John only had a message of repentance, it would hardly be **Good News**. It wouldn't have had the effect, as the Message puts it, of *giving strength to the people and putting heart in them*. The other side to John's ministry is that he was the herald of incredible news. His father Zechariah had prophesied this in the words of the canticle Benedictus which we said together.

*And you, child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way, to give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of all their sins. In the tender compassion of our God the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.*

Isn't that what society desperately needs? My second absolute conviction is that **Jesus is Good News**. I'm not sure that I'm good news in every situation, or that the Church and Christians always are... but I am sure that Jesus Christ is!

In the December monthly news, I reflect on the reaction to the announcement of my engagement (*our* engagement, I should say!). I've been bowled over by how delighted everyone seems to be about it. Everywhere I go people say things like *'it brought tears to my eyes'; 'you've made my day/week/year'; 'we're so happy for you both'*. But then again, that's the nature of Good News: people get very excited about it, want to know every detail, can't wait to pass it on to others. We mustn't lose that sense, while everything is being shaken around us, that Jesus is the hope of the nation; the light in the darkness; the way, the truth, the life; the ultimate answer to all our problems and needs. In a world crying out for Good News, he is still the best.

That's the simple message we'll be trying to bring to people again at Christmas, through all our services, literature and special events... and in our everyday conversation. We can testify from our own experience that Jesus has been Good News to us – that he's rescued us and changed our lives. Ultimately John's whole ministry was about pointing away from himself, and to Jesus.

*The main character in this drama, to whom I'm a mere stagehand, will ignite the kingdom life, a fire, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out. He's going to clean house—make a clean sweep of your lives. He'll place everything true in its proper place before God; everything false he'll put out with the trash to be burned.*

That's how the Message translates the passage we read. And it's our calling too – to be signposts pointing beyond ourselves to Jesus, the Desire of all nations. Next week, as we always do, we'll be asking you to take bundles of Christmas Service invitations and *HOPE for Christmas* magazines and distribute them around our parish. Next Sunday evening's service at Trinity will be part mass leaflet drop round Broadmead, and for those unable to go out, a chance to pray for all the Christmas events we put on or host. But a personal invitation to a friend to come to something or giving them a magazine will be even more effective. Our Parent and Toddler parties, the All Age Celebration, the Carol Service and other Christmas services are all opportunities to welcome our community in Christian love and pray God will touch them through the contact.

And my prayer is that somehow through all that stuff (or maybe not through anything we do, just something that comes on TV or at the children's school over Christmas) God will speak to hearts about those two simple convictions that shine through the ministry of John the Baptist. Firstly, that nationally and individually we need to return to God – to reconnect with him and turn away from things which have pushed him out or hidden him from our eyes. And secondly, that Jesus really is Good News in a world crying out for something real and lasting to build our lives on.

### **To discuss (Luke 3:7-20):**

1. John challenged the ordinary people on **economic injustice** and the tax collectors and soldiers on **abuse of power**. Where do we need to repent of those two things, individually and as a nation?
2. What can we say, simply and clearly, from a biblical perspective regarding the complex political, economic, social and moral problems facing us today?
3. How has Jesus been Good News in your life?
4. What opportunities does Christmas in Trowbridge give us to share this Good News?