

John the Baptist 3 Cell Notes

This is the third and final part of a series on Luke 3 and John the Baptist. I considered reading right to the end of Chapter 3 which finishes with a 76 generation genealogy tracing Jesus' birth right back to Adam and God – a sort of supercharged *ancestry.com*! That's important because it places Jesus firmly within the history of Israel, the world and God, but I decided not to read all 76 names out loud – I couldn't do that to Jane... or you! So, for now, let's take a final look at the ministry and message of John the Baptist.

For many years, we used a strapline here at St Thomas', '*preparing the hearts of the people and the structures of the church for the next great move of God in England*'. I still really like that, but I also like the one we've been using recently '*Christ focused; community facing; church family*'. *Preparing the hearts of the people and the structures of the church* is a very 'John the Baptist' statement. He was all about getting the nation of Israel and its religious institutions ready for Jesus' coming. And we've seen how he did that by preaching repentance, life-change – heart-level returning to God, evidenced by changed actions. John was speaking to the nation at a time of political turmoil and spiritual crisis.

Our nation is facing a political, and very possibly, a constitutional crisis at this moment. I really don't have a good feeling about what's going on right now. That feeling is made worse by the sneaking suspicion that we've brought this on ourselves. That isn't a political statement, but a spiritual one. It derives from a conviction that the root of our problems isn't political, social, economic, philosophical or psychological (though those are all involved)... but spiritual. Human beings are designed to live in relationship with God. We were never meant to function independently of him, and when we remove ourselves from that place, we become increasingly dysfunctional, individually and collectively. I have a horrible feeling that we are now reaping what we've sown in our public life (and the same thing seems to be happening both across the Channel and across the Atlantic.) John the Baptist, I'm sure, would be calling us to return to dependence and trust in God, individually and as a nation.

A call has gone out on social media to make today a day for prayer for our government. That has to be the right thing to do at this moment, doesn't it? And it leaves me very torn, because we've designated this evening as a time of prayer but also a time of outreach to the Broadmead estate with our Christmas literature. Christmas is still the biggest annual opportunity we have to share the Good News of Jesus and it's important that we reach out to our parish with these invitations this week in time for the All Age Service next Sunday. Similarly it's important we pray for those Christmas events, but it's also vital to pray for our government. The only answer, as I see it, is for plenty of us to turn out this evening – even if you don't normally come in the evening or weren't planning to today, I'm urging you to consider coming along. So some people can deliver leaflets, some can pray (for the Christmas events *and* for the government) or if you want, you can do both – pray for a while, then go out delivering. Since society is showing no sign of turning to God before Tuesday, it's up to us to pray at this critical moment in our history. Please come if you possibly can.

I said our old strapline was very John the Baptist, but what about the last bit? *Preparing the hearts of the people and the structures of the church for the next great move of God in England*. John was preparing them for the once-for-all, supreme move of God, the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. We've been praying and preparing for something rather different – that God will move in the hearts of men, women and children, drawing them back into a restored relationship with him in such large numbers that the whole of society will look and feel different. I talk about this in more detail in Chapter 4 of *Advent with Luke* – how we are a John the Baptist generation, looking and longing for God to move and seeking to prepare ourselves and others for that to happen. But how realistic is that? Is it just whistling in the dark? Or worse, misleading?

I said last week I've been reading a challenging book by Clifford Hill in which he's very critical of church leaders, like me, who talk about revival and encourage people to think God is about to move in our nation. He sees this as false hope, based on a faulty interpretation of Biblical Prophecy and rooted in the teaching of the *Latter Rain* movement of the last century which has never won mainstream approval. This is difficult. No one wants to peddle false hope and mislead people, but at the same time surely we have to have hope for the here and now as well as eternity? If that's been wrong, then I stand accused.

Some of you will remember I had a strange experience last Sunday. Due to a mix up, I had to do the reading from Luke 3, and even though I'd read it many times, I was powerfully struck by one particular verse. Tantalizingly, I said it had happened, but didn't elaborate. Now I can. The verse was Luke 3:15,

The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah.

Israel had been waiting for hundreds of years for the coming of Messiah. (For example, Simeon and Anna who we meet in the previous Chapter, hanging out in the temple having spent a lifetime watching and waiting for the fulfilment of God's promise.) There must have been many false dawns during that period. A religious or political leader would arise, attract a following and pretty soon people would be wondering if he was the Messiah, just as they did about John. There must have been a lot of disappointments, maybe even disillusionment, as one leader after another failed to live up to their hopes. Now they get all worked up about John and wondering if he could be the Messiah. But John quickly bursts that bubble and tells them, *it's not me, but the greater One is coming after me*. Notice he doesn't say how soon. We know it was only a very short time after, but the people couldn't have told how long he meant.

So are our hopes of Revival illusory? I've been careful, in recent times, not to say how soon it will come or exactly what form it will take. And to be honest, my belief in a coming move of God isn't based so much on a particular prophecy or eschatology (end times theory) as on the nature of God. I often use '4Gs' to describe him: He's Good, Great, Gracious and Glorious. Surely this good and gracious God who wants everyone to be saved can't stand by forever while the spiritual slide away from him continues? Won't he act in sovereign mercy and grace? The only question is how bad

things need to get before we turn back to him. And surely it doesn't befit a great and glorious God to end up coming back only for a tiny remnant who have stayed faithful, while vast multitudes are lost? It's that sense of who God is (not a particular prophecy or teaching) that keeps me saying *'there must be more than this'*. Paul says that hope will not ultimately disappoint us. When we tie our hopes to a particular person, movement, ministry or prophetic word we easily set ourselves up for disappointment. But humble hope based on the goodness, greatness, grace and glory of God is surely a very Biblical thing.

The best known verse in the Bible is probably still John 3:16,

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

God didn't stop *so loving* the world once he'd sent Jesus. My conviction is that his love will find a way to turn us back to him. I know this is complicated because we have free will and people can refuse to accept his overtures of love. But at the same time, I believe his overwhelming grace and mercy must eventually find a way to triumph, that not one drop of the blood Jesus shed will be wasted, and he will have a rich reward for the price he paid. That's why there's hope for our nation and for the world. At the darkest moment in Israel's national life, under God's judgment, disgraced and in exile, Jeremiah wrote these amazing words (Lamentation 3:21-23):

Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail.

The Psalmist asks the question (Psalm 11:3),

When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?

The implied answer is: they can put their trust in God... and pray. I'm going to hand over to Marjory to lead our prayers in a moment. But first I want to use Psalm 25 as a prayer for church and nation at what feels like a serious moment in our national life.

For Discussion (Luke 3:15-23):

1. If John the Baptist were here today, what do you think he would be saying to the following:

- a) The Prime Minister and Members of Parliament?
- b) St Thomas' Church Congregation?
- c) The general population of Trowbridge/the UK?
- d) You personally?

2. Are hopes for a new 'move of God' in this country illusory or real? If real, on what do you base this expectation?