

Followers of the Way

Sermon 4 – 12 December 2021

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Prepare the Way of the Lord

Luke 3:1-18

All four Gospels tell us about John the Baptist preparing the way for the coming of Jesus. We've chosen the version in Luke's Gospel for today's reading as it's the longest and most detailed, but each of the others offers valuable perspectives on the story. I love the way Matthew introduces it: "In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near'" (Luke 3:1). In a few simple words, this positions us instantly in time, place and life situation:

Time = In those days. We know what kind of days they were, because Matthew describes them a few verses earlier: days when a ruthless, despotic ruler (Herod the Great) had children murdered.

Place = the Desert of Judea. A harsh place, where we'd normally expect to find neither sustenance nor growth.

Life situation = where there is a desperate need for repentance in the nation.

How similar to our own time, when even governments that call themselves democratic are growing more and more dictatorial. When (as Lynda reminded us last week) the slaughter of the innocents – the unborn – continues relentlessly. When the Church of Jesus Christ seems to be in a desert place, cut off from access to the people and unable to speak a word in season to those who desperately need it. The call is to repent: but when and from whence will it come?

John doesn't pursue what we might call a church growth strategy. In fact, to our natural way of thinking, he does just about the exact opposite. He doesn't look right, put himself in the right place or speak the right words.

Appearance. He "wore a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locust and wild honey." (Matthew 3:4, Mark 1:6). The man would have looked a fright.

Position. He was in the Desert of Judea – not exactly what you'd call "meeting people where they are" – though, to be fair, Luke tells us that before going into the desert John also "went into all the country round the Jordan" (Luke 3:3).

Speech. No sugar-coated words from John. No repetition of the mantra beloved of a certain type of modern preacher – that God loves us so deeply and unconditionally that He's prepared to allow us to continue our sinful lifestyles, to keep ignoring His commandments and to treat Him with disdain. Instead, he preached "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4, Luke 3:3).

But despite this, “The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him.” (Matthew 3:5, Mark 1:5). Why was that?

Firstly, because it was simply God’s time. This was a sovereign move of the LORD. Revival is always a sovereign move of God. It was 400 years since the word of God had last been heard from a prophet in Israel. In the last sentences of the Old Testament, Malachi records God saying, “See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to the fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.” (Malachi 4:5-6).

Secondly, because John responded faithfully to God’s call on his life. Luke tells us that “the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert” (Luke 3:2) and, in response to this, John began his mission of preaching repentance.

We don’t know how long John spent in the desert. Presumably, he’d gone there to seek God. But, however long it takes, the LORD’s promise is sure and true: “You will seek me and you will find me when you seek me with your whole heart.” (Jeremiah 29:13).

This is a season in which the words of the prophet Isaiah need to ring out again in this land: “Prepare the way of the LORD; make straight paths for him.” (Luke 3:4, quoting Isaiah 40:3). The King is coming and, just as in ancient times, His subjects are called to make the way ready for His arrival – to repair highways, remove obstacles and make sure all is as it should be to welcome royalty. That has applications for our own personal lives, of course, but it also applies on a national level.

To see what this might look like for us now, let’s consider first the cast of characters Luke sets before us:

There was a distant and malign imperial power pulling the strings behind the scenes, personified by Emperor Tiberius Caesar and the man he’d made governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate (Luke 3:1).

There were corrupt, self-seeking local rulers – Herod the Great’s three sons Herod the Tetrarch; Philip, tetrarch of Iturea and Triconitis; and Lysanias, tetrarch of Abilene (Luke 3:2).

There was a religious leadership (the high priests Annas and Caiaphas) more concerned with keeping in with the Romans, feathering their own nests and upholding man-made traditions than with being a channel for God’s activity in the nation.

There were the common people – harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 9:36) – who wanted to hear comforting words and perform familiar religious rituals, taking refuge in the idea that they had “Abraham as [their] father” (Luke 3:8) – not so very different from us, with our denominationalism and reflex pieties, thinking these mean we’re basically all right with God.

Does this landscape look familiar? Just so we don’t get too smug and think it’s all someone else’s problem, notice this: Matthew’s Gospel says, “But when he [John] saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptising, he said to them. ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee the coming wrath?’” (Matthew 3:7). If we stopped there, we might be tempted to think this lets us off the hook, to imagine John’s hard words are aimed only at the religious Establishment, or people we would identify as having a religious spirit. But Luke puts paid to that idea. He says John

spoke these same words to “the crowds coming out to be baptised by him” (Luke 3:7) – meaning, we’re as much in the firing line here as anyone else.

That’s Luke’s cast of characters. Next, let’s consider and truly take hold of what this passage shows about sin’s consequences – God’s judgment. John the Baptist calls it “the wrath to come” (Luke 3:7). Malachi calls it “the great and dreadful day of the LORD” (Malachi 4:5). When Jesus stood up in the synagogue in Capernaum and read from the book of Isaiah – the episode is related in the very next chapter of Luke’s Gospel – He said, “The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favour” (Luke 4:18-19) – and then he stopped before He reached the end of the sentence. If He’d finished the sentence, he would have read, “and the day of vengeance of our God.” (Isaiah 61:2). Jesus ended the quotation where He did because, the first time He came to earth, He did so to bring salvation: not to be served, but to serve (Matthew 20:28), to give His life as a ransom for many (Matthew 20:28, Mark 10:45), to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10), and so we might have life, and have it to the full (John 10:10).

That was why He came the first time. But soon He will come again, and then He will bring judgment. If we’ve never before felt a sense of urgency about the imminent return of the LORD and what this will mean for countless millions unless they repent, it’s time we started to get with the programme. According to the Encyclopaedia of Biblical Prophecy, all 600 prophecies covering the time up to the start of the 7-year Tribulation period have now happened.

John the Baptist tells it like it is: “The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” (Luke 3:9). He warns that God’s “winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” (Luke 3:17).

I’ve heard it said that, when John Wesley went somewhere new to preach, he spent the first three days talking about sin, repentance and the wrath to come. Only when he’d done that was the soil ready to receive the message of salvation. Who is preaching about this now? Who is preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins?

The LORD is coming again soon, and before He does, He will send once more the spirit of Elijah, another John the Baptist, to warn and call to repentance. What was Elijah’s mission? Fourfold:

- To stand bravely against the dictatorial rule of Ahab and Jezebel
- To be the voice of the LORD in the land at a time when Jezebel was killing the prophets and seeking to silence the Word of God
- To expose and destroy the false prophets of Baal and Asherah on Mount Carmel
- To anoint new political leaders and his successor as prophet.

John the Baptist did precisely the same:

- It was standing against dictatorial government and pointing out moral corruption at the heart of government that led to his imprisonment (Luke 3:19-20) and ultimately, his death (Matthew 14:8-11, Mark 6:24-28).
- He was the “voice of one crying in the wilderness” (Luke 3:4) at a time when the Word of the LORD had been absent from the land for centuries.

- He exposed false religion – hypocrisy in the religious establishment, false teaching, reliance on doctrines invented by man rather than the Word of God.
- He anointed (or, more correctly, baptised) the one who came after him – the “one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie ... [who] will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” (Luke 3:16).

God doesn't need us. John the Baptist reminds us that He can “raise up children for Abraham” (Luke 3:8) out of the stones. When Pharisees complained about Jesus' disciples praising joyfully at the time of the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, Jesus replied, “if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.” (Luke 19:40). No, God doesn't need us – but He has chosen to work with us and through us. Though revival is always and everywhere a sovereign move of God, there are things we can learn from past revivals about the part we need to play: in the Welsh revival of 1904-5, one of the triggers seems to have been a young girl standing up and saying she loved Jesus with all her heart; in the Hebridean revival of the 1950s, it was a man crying out in anguish, “O LORD, are my hands clean?”

There's no formula we can adopt, but it seems both uncompromising love for the LORD and heartfelt repentance are key.

We know repentance is more than simply saying sorry or even being sorry. Among other things, it involves a decision of the mind and will to turn from what's wrong and to embrace what's right. And the proof of the pudding is in the eating: if there's repentance, there'll be evidence of it in our deeds as well as our words. As John the Baptist puts it, we'll “produce fruit in keeping with repentance.” (Luke 3:8). God requires fruitfulness, and Jesus cursed the fig tree for not being fruitful (Matthew 21:18-22 and 24:32-35, Mark 11:12-14 and 11:20-24).

We've gone so far down the wrong track in this nation that even some in the Church no longer seem to know what repentance really means, and the majority of our people certainly don't. It was just the same when John the Baptist preached. That's why people asked, “What shall we do?” (Luke 3:10). They simply had no idea how to put repentance into practice. John didn't criticise them for this or leave them without guidance. He gave simple, practical advice they could take hold of and use (Luke 3:10-14):

- Advice for the people as a whole (Luke 3:10).
- Advice for those in government and civil administration, represented by the tax collectors (Luke 3:12).
- Advice for the police, military and security forces, represented by the soldiers (Luke 3:14)

Compare the spiritual landscape then with our own age. There's chaos in society and government. People are rudderless. They don't know how to think or act. They need the people of God to speak into their lives. With a message of repentance, but also with encouragement. John the Baptist didn't only have hard words. He had words of hope, too: “he exhorted the people and preached the good news to them.” (Luke 3:18). And, of course, he baptised them – a visible symbol of God's cleansing, washing away sin and giving us a fresh start.

The Scriptures tell us judgment begins at the house of God (1 Peter 4:17). Some may say there's been a lot of repentance from the Church, and in some senses that's true. But we don't know whether the “golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints” (Revelation 5:8) are yet full. And, it has to be said, though words of repentance have been spoken, in many areas we've failed to produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

We can't work it up. We can't make it happen in our own strength. But we can ask God to give us a gift of repentance. A gift of repentance for His Church in this land, and a gift of repentance for our people, too. If there's repentance, then the LORD will once more turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the hearts of the children to the fathers. But if repentance doesn't happen, He will indeed strike the land with a curse. There's a job for us to do in our day, same as the job Elijah and

John the Baptist were called to perform:

- To stand bravely against dictatorship, striking the proper balance between the duty to obey the earthly authorities (Romans 13:1) and the need to obey God rather than man (Acts 5:29).
- To be the voice of the LORD, even if it feels like we're crying in the wilderness.
- To expose and destroy falsehood.

Is that without risk and without cost? Of course not. But it is, quite simply, a matter of life and death. And it must be done.