

Sermon – 03/10/2010 am

Flee the Coming Wrath

Study Text: Luke 3:7-14

Can you imagine a man like John the Baptist appearing in our city? For anyone to get a message across today they have to get on the TV or internet it seems. Would the press give a man like John the Baptist air time? Years ago in a city park, men would stand up on a box and start speaking about something and people would gather around to listen. In some countries open air preachers can still get a hearing.

John the Baptist must have been quite a sight as he came from the wilderness dressed only in a camel hair coat and a leather belt. When he began preaching people noticed something different about this man. He spoke boldly. He spoke with authority, like a man filled with the Spirit of God. Some were reminded of the prophet Elijah whom they read about in the Bible.

Why did people flock to hear this man? Some were probably curious, wanting to see this weird looking preacher. Others were looking for Messiah, the promised deliverer of Israel. Many went out because they were weighed down with guilt and shame. Society had become corrupt. The political leaders were corrupt and immoral. If they had daily papers the front page would have been filled with violence, sex, corruption and lies every day.

Many were caught up in this wickedness and futility. They had turned away from God and become like the pagans, without God and without hope in this world. They were, as Jesus said, harassed and hopeless, like sheep without a shepherd.

Wrath

What do people hear from preachers in the church today? Do they hear a call to repent of their sin? What did the people hear from the mouth of John the Baptist? *Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath (3:7)?* We might think such words would send people running. They were designed to send people running to God for forgiveness of their sin. John was baptizing those who repented of their sin. His baptism in the Jordan River was a sign and seal of that repentance.

Vipers are poisonous snakes. This is a metaphor for sly and slimy people, for people who backbite and lie through their teeth. John knew about the life of the people who were coming to him to be baptized. Many were weighed down by their sin, by things they had said and done, or failed to say and do. Have you ever felt the weight of your sin? These were people who thought only of themselves all the time. Do you know that feeling? Pride gripped their hearts and it was strangling them.

It is a shame that church buildings have such massive doorways. Maybe this is not the case everywhere. Church doors should be less than a metre high. That way we would have to get down on our knees to enter. We would have to humble ourselves to enter the presence of God. We would have to become like little children, as Jesus said. Of course it is humble hearts not just bent knees that the Lord requires.

According to Matthew, who gives a very similar account of the ministry of John the Baptist, there were Sadducees and Pharisees in this crowd that came out to the Jordan. These were the religious teachers and leaders of the Jews. The Sadducees were also involved in politics. The Pharisees were

self-righteous legalists, striving to keep the letter of the law, after they had added their own rules and traditions. They were particularly concerned that everyone else kept the law and the traditions.

The Pharisees were proud of being descendants of Abraham, pure breed Jews. As such they claimed an automatic right to be children of God. John anticipated their claim. *Do not begin to say you have Abraham as your father because I say God can rise up children to Abraham from these stones* (3:8). John absolutely demolished their claim. The Pharisees did not accept John's baptism (Matthew 21:25). You may be proud of your heritage but remember it counts nothing before God.

John the Baptist did not make himself popular with these self-righteous legalists – nor did Jesus after him. When Jesus told such Jews that they were slaves to sin they refused to humble themselves and repent of their sin. He told them he could make them free, but they were offended and tried to kill him (John 8:59).

The preacher's task today is still the same – to tell it like it is; to tell the truth as found in the Bible. *The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men* (Romans 1:18). As John began preaching he declared the wrath of God against sin. Jesus preached more on the wrath of God than anyone else in the Bible. Fear him who after he has killed, has power to cast you into hell. *Unless you repent you will all likewise perish* said Jesus (Luke 12:5, 13:3). Remember we are all born in sin and so born under the wrath of God. That wrath remains till you repent.

The wrath and judgment of God are portrayed in two ways by John the Baptist. Firstly he speaks of the axe being ready to take out the tree. If the tree does not bear good fruit it is cut down and thrown into the fire (3:9). That is a reasonable don't you think. You plant a tree expecting it to produce good fruit to eat. If it produces only bad fruit you cut it down.

I had a large mandarin tree in my backyard. It produced a heavy crop of large mandarins. They looked delicious but were dry and full of fibre. I watered the tree and put on different fertilisers hoping to get sweet juicy fruit. But the fruit did not change. One day I borrowed the neighbour's chain saw and that was the end of that tree. There is nothing left, not even a mark on the ground. What sort of fruit is the Lord seeing in your life?

Further on John speaks of Jesus coming in judgment (3:17). 'But Jesus came to save' you say. Indeed he did. That is what his name means; 'one who saves'. But as the Son of God he is the righteous one who hates sin. God the Father has committed all judgment to the Son (John 5:22). When Jesus comes again in glory he will divide the sheep from the goats, or as John said, he will clean his threshing floor. His winnowing fork is in his hand. He will separate the wheat from the chaff. Like the tree bearing fruit, the useless chaff will be burned with unquenchable fire (3:17).

Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand said John (Matthew 3:2). His words were not without hope. He was not preaching inevitable doom and destruction. Repentance means a change of heart, a turning away from sin and turning towards God. True repentance will be seen in a changed life, a life bearing fruit worthy of repentance (3:8).

John goes on to describe such fruits. Changed hearts will seek to obey God's commands. First, love God with all your heart, all your soul and all your mind, and second, love your neighbour as yourself. Changed hearts will hate what is evil, and desire what is good. *Let love be without hypocrisy; abhor what is evil and cling to what is good* (Romans 12:9).

What to Do

The people who heard John preaching asked 'what shall we do then' (3:10). Are you asking what you should do to show that you have repented of your sin? What would John have told you to do? When the apostle Peter preached at Pentecost he was asked the same question. What shall we do (Acts 2:37)? Peter said *repent and be baptised for the remission of sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*. The Holy Spirit will produce fruit in your life, the fruits of righteousness.

What did John tell the people to do? The Holy Spirit had not yet been poured out. Hence his baptism was only a baptism of repentance. Jesus would bring the baptism of the Holy Spirit. But repentance is still essential. Jesus preached repentance as did Peter and Paul.

There is no indication that the Pharisees asked this question of John, and no indication that they turned from their self-righteous ways. But we read here of three different types of people who asked John what shall we do. John's answers have already given us some insight into the society of that day.

Firstly, John spoke to the rich, to those who had more than one set of clothes and more food than they could eat. They asked him what they should do to show their repentance. He said 'if you have two garments give one away; give one to a person who has none. If you have more food than you can eat give it to someone who is hungry'.

Imagine rich people having lots of clothes while others went around naked! Imagine rich people whose cupboards were stocked with food while others went hungry. Jesus did not imagine but spoke of a certain rich man at whose gate a beggar lay; he condemned that man (Luke 16:19). What do you think these people did when they went back from the Jordan to their homes? What should they have done to show that they repented of not loving their neighbour as themselves? What should you do to love your neighbour as God tells us to do?

Tax collectors would have been among the rich but they had their own question for John the Baptist. Tax collectors were hated by most others Jews because they collected taxes for the Romans. Moreover, they abused their position by demanding more than the set amount of tax. Zacchaeus the tax collector confessed to this when he met Jesus. He promised Jesus to pay back whatever he had taken by extortion, as well as give half his goods to the poor.

John did not tell these men they had to give up their jobs as the Jewish leaders might have. Rather he told them to act with integrity and honesty in their workplace and collect only the prescribed amount of tax. Presumably he would have told the tax payers to pay the set amount if they had asked.

The third group to ask John what to do was soldiers. These were probably Jewish soldiers, men who protected the tax collectors and other officials. They were guilty of extortion. They obtained money by threatening people with violence or false charges. Have you seen such things, people using their position of authority to extort money and abuse people? Pray the Lord to keep those who enforce the law from corruption.

Be content with your wages John told the soldiers (3:14). Some people try to excuse their corruption saying they are not being paid a good wage. The tenth commandment, the one that many overlook, says 'do not covet'. In other words be content with what you have. Be content with your wages, be content with your house and car, and be content with your food and your family. Give thanks to the Lord for all his blessings.

Repentance begins in the heart. If you are content you will not be grasping after more and more material things. It is this desire that leads to cheating and dishonesty in the workplace. It is this desire that leads to gambling. Such things are sinful because they harm others. It is a breach of the command to love your neighbour as yourself. Let us examine our lives with regard to this command, confirmed as it was by Jesus. Let us repent of coveting, and hurting our neighbour in the things we do and say.

Rev. Dr. Dennis K. Muldoon