

Sermon – 10/10/2010 am

John and Jesus

Study Text: Luke 3:15-20

John came in from the desert dressed in a camel hair coat and started to preach. His preaching was powerful. He called the people to repent of their sin and those who repented he baptized in the Jordan River. The people wondered what was going on, and who this man was. Was he the promised Messiah, the anointed one sent to deliver them?

This was a time of heightened expectation among the Jews of the coming of Messiah. It was a time of religious and moral decay in the land. Poor people were looking for release because they were being oppressed. Others felt guilty for neglecting the poor, or of oppressing them. Some felt guilty of the moral decadence in which they were living. Many were looking for release, and for the light of a new day.

Person

Crowds came out to see and hear John (3:7). He was a popular preacher. He had some asking if he was the Christ. John could have taken advantage of his popularity and become a famous person. If he managed the situation well he could become rich and famous. He would not have been the first preacher to look to such personal benefits.

John answered, saying to all ... One mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to untie (3:16). John immediately pointed the people away from himself and towards Christ. He took no credit or glory to himself. He gave all glory to Christ. John protested his utter unworthiness compared to Christ.

Like all societies the Jews had their own class structure. Older people were respected by those who were younger. John was born before Jesus yet he said the one coming after him ranked above him (John 1:27). One who is younger in human terms would shortly be given greater honour by John. In that society rabbis or teachers were respected by their students or disciples. Students were expected to honour and serve their teacher.

But such service stopped short of untying their sandal straps. Students would do all sorts of menial tasks for their teachers but loosening sandal thongs was expressly excluded. John said he was not even worthy to do this most humbling service for the one coming after him, that was Jesus Christ. These words which are found in all four gospels, demonstrate how John felt in the presence of Jesus. How would you feel in the presence of Jesus? How do you feel in his presence? Do you share John's respect and reverence for Jesus?

John knew what God had called him to do. He was to prepare the way of the Lord. He was like a signpost showing the way to the palace of the king on a high mountain, the King of kings. 'He must increase, I must decrease' said John. John recognized who Jesus was. He humbled himself before the Creator of this universe and the one who would redeem men through the Cross.

All believers and all preachers especially, must humble themselves before the Lord saying 'he must increase, I must decrease'. There is no place in the ministry for men who seek fame or fortune. The apostle Paul said *we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus the Lord and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus sake* (II Corinthians 4:5). Paul condemned the Corinthians for saying one

preacher was superior to another. Preachers are to be condemned if they claim to be superior, and Christians are to be condemned if they speak of one preacher being superior to another.

A preacher's task is to point people to Christ, not to himself. Some preachers are praised for their eloquence, their dynamism or their ability to tell stories and make jokes. Do such attributes point people to Christ? A preacher is called to preach Christ and Him crucified. He does not do so in his own power but in the power of the Holy Spirit. Listening to the message is also done with the help of the Holy Spirit. Sermons are not for entertainment but for enlightenment and edification.

There is another aspect to the praise given by people – it is often short lived. People are terribly fickle. Those who heard John were so impressed they were asking whether or not he was the Christ. They were ready to become his disciples and do whatever he said. But within a short time John was put into prison. Luke includes this detail before John actually baptized Jesus so as to make his account orderly. He brings his focus on John to a close before focusing on Jesus.

The man who preaches the truth, rather than what 'itching ears' want to hear, will inevitably end up with enemies. He may end up with very few listening to him. John became an enemy of Herod Antipas when he rebuked him for divorcing his wife in order to marry Herodias. Herodias was the wife of his brother Phillip, and also his own niece (1:19). Herod was guilty of many other evils but Luke does not elaborate.

Herod thought he was above the law, even the law of God. He would silence this man who dared to speak against him. We are not told what charge he brought against John – was he charged with declaring the truth from God's word? Many think they can break God's law with impunity. Many think they are above God's law. For a time they may get away with their evil deeds. John was not only put in prison but was later beheaded at the instigation of Herodias. She was an evil person just like her husband.

Baptism

Before John was locked away he told about the baptism of Jesus. In the context of saying that Jesus was more powerful, he said that Jesus would *baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire* (3:16). John was baptizing with water but Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. It was not within John's power or the power of any man to baptize with the Holy Spirit. John was given authority to baptize with water those who repented of their sin. But he did not know the heart of anyone. He had to accept their confession. He had no power to see into peoples' hearts or to give out the Spirit of God.

J.C. Ryle writes 'man can dispense the outward ordinances of Christianity with a prayerful hope that God will graciously bless the means which he himself has appointed. But man cannot read the hearts of those to whom he ministers. He can preach the gospel faithfully to their ears, but he cannot make them receive it into their consciences. He can apply baptismal water to their foreheads but he cannot cleanse their inward nature'.

Some are critical of infant baptism because the infant cannot confess their sin. But how do we know if an adult has truly repented of their sin? Scripture does not teach baptismal regeneration of either adults or infants. Baptism is an outward sign and seal of regeneration of the heart (Westminster Confession of Faith, Ch. 28), but regeneration of the heart is the work of God by his Spirit. Only the Holy Spirit can change human hearts.

Baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire refers to this inner change, this heart change that Jesus in his great power brings about. He gives the Holy Spirit to all whom the Father draws and gives to him.

The Holy Spirit is called the Spirit of truth (John 14:17). He is called the Spirit of adoption (Romans 8:15). Baptism with the Holy Spirit means conviction of sin, cleansing of the heart and the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit. This is the work which God does through the Holy Spirit. It is the blood of Jesus Christ that is powerful to cleanse us from our sin as the Holy Spirit quickens our dead hearts and makes us alive in Christ.

Baptism with the Holy Spirit was seen most clearly on the day of Pentecost. Tongues of fire marked the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the disciples, as Jesus promised. Some confine the mention of fire by John to the day of Pentecost. However, we must look at the context here where John is answering the crowd. He has already spoken of judgment in terms of fire in verse 9, and in verse 17 he speaks of the *unquenchable fire* which is the fire of judgment.

Fire is very powerful in two ways and we find these two ways referred to in the Bible. Malachi refers to the refiner's fire, the fire that purifies (Malachi 3:3). Fire is used to burn up impurities in precious metals like gold and silver. Paul writes of God using fire to test and reveal each one's work (I Corinthians 3:13). God by his word and his Spirit convicts us of our sin. This conviction leads us to cry out 'what must I do to be saved?'

Fire also burns up or consumes. The chaff that is separated from the wheat is not refined – it is completely consumed in the fire. (3:17). Fire is a metaphor for judgment. Jesus came to save us from sin and death. He will apply the blowtorch at times to remind us of his power and his love. Jesus is coming again to judge the world in righteousness (Acts 17:31). At that time his enemies will be destroyed. They will be cast into the lake of fire.

'Just as fire consumes what is destructible and thus works in a purifying and cleansing manner, so Messiah will through the Holy Spirit consume sin and sinners in so far as they cling to sin'. So wrote one commentator. If you cling to your sin you will be burned up when Jesus comes to burn up sin. Let go of your sin. Repent of your sin and you will not be burned up on judgment day.

Submit now to the purifying fire of Jesus. Receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire and become a new person in Jesus – new, not perfect. The Holy Spirit will work in your heart making it pure like the heart of Jesus Christ our Lord. There will be pain at times as you are moulded into the likeness of Christ, but that pain is for your good. Accept the purifying fire of the Holy Spirit today and avoid the consuming fire on the Day of Judgment.

Rev. Dr. Dennis K. Muldoon