

Sermon – 26/09/2010 am

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

Study Text: Luke 3:1-6

Driving along the other day I had to stop while workmen fixed another speed bump in the road. I thought how strange that one day a team comes along to repair the road and make it smooth for driving and the next another team comes to install bumps to make it rough for driving. What was even stranger was something I saw some years ago. I saw men removing road bumps because the prime minister was to drive down the road the next day. This happened in India. The bumps were removed so the prime minister could drive down the road and then they were put back again.

The prophet Isaiah spoke of a voice crying in the wilderness – *prepare the way of the Lord*. He spoke of crooked places being made straight and rough places being made smooth for the coming of the Lord (Isaiah 40:3-4). Over 700 years later his words were fulfilled in the coming of John the Baptist. The three gospel writers, Matthew, Mark and Luke, all speak of this fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy.

Princes and Priests

We last saw Jesus in the temple when he was twelve year old. He went back to Nazareth with his parents. We will next see him at about thirty years of age (3:23). We last saw John as a baby although Luke indicates he was later in the desert (1:80). Before the birth of John it was told by the angel how he would prepare the way for the Lord. At his circumcision his father Zacharias prophesied that he would prepare the way of the Lord.

John was born just six months before Jesus. That was around 4BC, during the reign of Caesar Augustus. *Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar* (3:1). Once again Luke carefully details the time when these events took place. He is not writing mythology for which history is irrelevant. He is writing about Jesus who is a historical person. He places the life of Jesus firmly in history. He gives markers in Roman history as well as in Jewish history. He is keeping to his promise in the prologue to write an accurate and orderly account.

Caesar Augustus died in AD14. Tiberius ruled the Roman Empire from AD14-37. His fifteenth year would have been around AD28. The Roman Empire included the land of Israel. At the local level Herod the Great ruled at the time of John's birth. After his death three of his sons ruled different parts of the land. There were four parts so they were called tetrarchs.

Archelaus ruled in Judea and Samaria for a short time (Matthew 2:22). He was intensely hated because of his incompetence and cruelty, so was deposed by Rome. They put a governor in his place. Pontius Pilate was the governor from AD26-36. In the northern part of the land was the province of Galilee. This was under Herod Antipas, while his brother Herod Phillip ruled over provinces further north. Nothing is known of Lysanias apart from what Luke records here.

These tetrarchs ruled over a mixed population, except in Judea where it was predominantly Jewish. Jerusalem was the political and religious centre of this region. The temple was in this city. The Jews were allowed to worship in the temple while ever they kept politics out of their worship.

The head of the temple and the Jewish religion was the High Priest. This position was hereditary, restricted to the sons of Aaron. Annas was the High Priest but the Romans removed him in AD15

and installed his son. At this particular time it was his son-in-law Caiaphas who was the official High Priest. Annas was still around and recognized by many Jews as the real High Priest. So Luke wrote during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas (3:2).

This record of princes and priests, of political and religious leaders, places these events at a precise time in history- although this was done with the reference to the year of the emperor's reign. History is not just about dates. We want to know what life was like back then. What were the features of that society? What was the political and religious environment? The details given by Luke allow us to 'get a feel' for these things.

Rome was the superpower. It ruled the known world through its massive army. Israel was part of that world. The Jews were under the rule of a pagan- a far cry from the days of David. In a sense we are also, but we did have some choice in the matter. Pontius Pilate was governor in Judea. The Herods were of Jewish origin but were really puppets to Rome. They were corrupt and/or cruel as small time rulers tend to be.

What about the church or the religious establishment? Who was High Priest? Politics has entered the priesthood from both outside and inside. Caiaphas was not a son but the son-in-law of Annas.

What effect did this political and religious environment have on the population? Many went with the flow as people tend to do. If the leaders were corrupt and immoral why should the people be any different? Herod the Great had a number of wives while his son Antipas divorced in order to marry his brother's wife. Corruption and immorality flowed from the top down into the society. Consider for example the Samaritan woman Jesus met (John 4). Yet these people were not happy living as they were. They felt uneasy, even guilty about the things they were doing. The tax collectors were ripping the people off, especially the poor, while the people were busy trying to cheat the tax man.

The people of God hated this corruption and immorality. Living faithfully in this depraved society was not easy. They looked for a new day and a new ruler. In the Scripture they read of the promised Messiah. Do you hate the wicked that prevails in our society? Are you looking for a new day? Do you believe a new day is coming? Read the Bible and you will find that Jesus promised to come again – soon!

Prophet

The word of God came to John, son of Zacharias, in the desert (3:2). Into this corrupt and immoral society, into this spiritual darkness came the word of God. It came to John who had taken to living in the desert. The word of God came to prophets of old like Isaiah and Jeremiah (Jeremiah 2:1). The word of God had not come like this for over 400 years. John was to be a mouthpiece for God.

The prophet's task was never easy. In fact it was dangerous. Some were killed as they carried out their duty. John himself joined the ranks of the martyrs. Yet John had the privilege of announcing the arrival of Messiah. He was the last of the prophets under the old covenant. In the past God spoke to the fathers by the prophets but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son (Hebrews 1:1-2). A new day – the last days – were just around the corner. Prepare the way of the Lord.

Luke does not mention the manner of dress and the life that John lived, but he does indicate that he was living in the wilderness or desert east of the Jordan. After receiving this divine calling John began preaching in the region around the Jordan River. He needed access to the river for the purpose of baptizing. He preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (3:3).

The life of a true prophet was not the choice of any man. Who would choose to live- and die- as John did? The prophet was called by God to speak the words of God. While we do not have prophets like John today, the minister of the word in the church today is similar. It is not for men to choose a career in the ministry. It is a calling from God. It is not for men to preach their own ideas. It is for them to preach the word of God. According to his word, God does not call women to a preaching ministry. He does not send dreams or visions or special revelations for men to preach. He has given us the Holy Bible to preach.

Preaching

What was the purpose of John's preaching, and what was his message? His preaching was to prepare the way of the Lord. This was what the prophet Isaiah said. He spoke in a figurative way of roads being made straight, hills being levelled and valleys being filled. We speak of 'rolling out the red carpet' for VIP's. The language of Isaiah is much more dramatic but the meaning is the same. John was 'rolling out the red carpet' for the King of kings and Lord of lords. 'All flesh shall see the salvation of God'. Isaiah was speaking of the revelation of God's only begotten Son to the whole world.

This preparation was of a spiritual nature. The kingdom of God is not of this world. John called for the people to repent, to turn from their sinful ways. He warned them to flee from the coming wrath, the coming wrath of God. To flee to God from God's wrath might seem strange, but that was what John preached. He preached this because God forgives those who come to him repenting of their sin.

Repentance means turning away from the things of this world, from idolatry, from immorality, and all evil. It means turning back to God our Maker and Lord. John called for obedience to the commands of God. He called for people to humble themselves before the Lord. John's baptism was a sign of this humiliation, and of true repentance in the heart.

True and faithful worship was at low ebb in John's day. Few paid attention to the covenant commands. It was not unlike the days in which Isaiah himself prophesied. 'Shame on you sinful nation! ... a people weighed down with sins' said Isaiah (Isaiah 1:4). It was not unlike today. How many pay heed to the commands of God today? How many fear God and worship him? How many believe that God will judge the wicked? You had better believe it because God has said it.

God sent all sorts of afflictions upon Israel by way of warning them to turn back to him. They were made subject to other nations- to pagan rulers. It was the same in John's day. What about today? The world groans under the rule of corrupt leaders. It groans under the ravages of war, violence and corruption. But who is listening to the voice of God. Who is taking heed and turning from their wicked ways. Who is repenting and believing in the Lord Jesus Christ. Are you?

John was preparing the way for the Redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ. It is Jesus who forgives our sins- and only Jesus. It is Jesus who gives us life -and only Jesus. Jesus said 'unless you also repent you will likewise perish'. Now is the day of salvation. The end is near. Repent and believe in Jesus Christ who forgives your sin, and gives you eternal life.

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