

The Witness of John

Reading: Luke 1:57-end, John 1:1-42

HN, SS 4/1/04 am

Study: John 1:6-9

Psalms: 104:1-6, 104:31-35, 111:1-5, 111:7-10

*And you child shall be called the prophet of the Highest,
For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways.
To give knowledge of salvation to his people
By the remission of their sins
Through the tender mercy of our God
With which the dayspring from on high has visited us
To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death
To guide our feet into the way of peace. (Luke 1:76f)*

All the gospels refer to John the Baptist, the forerunner or herald of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. John was sent by God with the special task of saying *Behold! the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*. He was sent by God to be a witness to the light, the light whom we have been told in the preceding verses was the Word, Jesus Christ.

The OT Scriptures prophesied of John. He took the words of Isaiah 40:3 as referring to himself and his mission –

*The voice of one crying in the wilderness
Make straight the way of the Lord.*

There was also the prophecy of his own father, Zachariah, at the time of his birth. John was dedicated a Nazarite; he was filled with the Holy Spirit and became a prophet, the last of the prophets apart from Christ himself. He came preaching in the wilderness and baptizing with water – a baptism of repentance.

The writer of this gospel does not call him John the Baptist because there was no need to. There is only one John in this gospel, the other John, the apostle, is the author.

Sent from God

John's parents were old and his mother, Elizabeth, was barren. That was until strange things started to happen – wonderful things. An angel visited Zachariah in the temple and said they would have a son. This was shortly before Mary was visited by the angel Gabriel and she, a virgin, became pregnant. Remember that moving occasion when the two mothers met and John leapt for joy within the womb of his mother (Luke 1:44). In this wonderful way John was bearing witness to the Light even before his birth!

While the writer of this fourth gospel does not go into the biographical detail, it nevertheless was important for him to anchor firmly in history the truths he is about to teach. He has started somewhat philosophically we might think, talking about the Word, about life and light. But now introduces us to a man, a historical person called John.

There was a man sent from God. This is very different to the Word who was with God. John was a man only. He was not divine. *This man came for a witness.* His task was

nothing more than to bear witness, to testify to the Light, God the son incarnate.

Witness

Nothing more than to bear witness- is that what I said? But you say what can be greater. What greater task can a man have than to bear witness to the Saviour of the world! And you would be right. Jesus himself said *Among those born of women there has not arisen one greater than John Baptist* (Matthew 11:11). All he did was preach and baptize. All he did was bear witness to the Light that was coming into the world. And he was the greatest among men according to Jesus – greater even than the great leader Moses and the great kings David and Solomon.

Witness is an important word in this gospel. Here in our text we find it three times alone. Our word 'martyr' comes directly (transliteration) from this Greek word. John of course was beheaded for the witness that he gave to the word of God. And many others have similarly suffered from being witnesses to the Word, for testifying unto death that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. **Just** a witness, **just** a preacher – these things take on new meaning – they carry a greater responsibility than we first think.

Witness is in the first instance a courtroom term. A witness is one who has seen or knows the truth and is willing to testify to the truth. You cannot be a witness if you do not know the truth. The witness is not the focus of the court, however. The focus is upon the accused and the truth as it relates to him. Once the witness has testified he is no longer needed.

John accepted his role as witness. He freely declared those words that exemplify total humility – *he must increase I must decrease* (3:30). And also – I am not worthy to loose his sandal straps. Note how he encouraged his own followers to follow Jesus (1:36). Pointing to Jesus he said *Behold the Lamb of God*, and two of his disciples left him to follow Jesus. That is humility. That is the role of a witness, the role of every servant of Jesus Christ.

Some people speculate on the basis of the negative statement in 1:8 – *he was not that light* – that there was a group at the time of writing who held that John the Baptist was the final revelation of God to man. But this cannot be verified. There were some of course who knew only the baptism of John – but by ignorance rather than arrogance it would seem (Acts 19). In any case John did not elevate himself among men in any way.

Servants of the Lord should remember this today – both those who preach and those who listen. Sadly there is a tendency for preachers to elevate themselves within the church. How tragic that men call themselves 'priests', putting themselves in a position between the Lord and his people, and making the people dependent on them rather than on the Lord Jesus himself. There are also those who act like priests even if they do not use the term. It is little better when the people of God became followers of some man, and literally follow a preacher from one church to another.

The preacher must point people to the Lord, as John did. And the people must follow the Lord as the previous disciples of John did. The church today would be greatly strengthened if we all followed this truth displayed by John.

True Light

What/who was the object of John's witness? He came to bear witness to that Light. The Light is the Word as we have already seen. And the Word is God the Son. Jesus said I am the Light of the world.

Remember the background – the sun that shines in the sky upon the whole world. J. C. Ryle writes 'Christ is to the souls of men what the sun is to the world' – the physical world he meant. It is light that is freely available to all. Some of course prefer the darkness of the night for their deeds are evil.

And there is the moon that reflects the light of the sun. When the sun is up the moon is invisible. But in the night it is there reflecting the light of the sun into the darkness. John was like the full moon reflecting the Light into a dark world. '*World*' in our text means the fallen world – fallen because of sin. This word can mean different things in this gospel but predominantly it means the fallen world of man.

The **true light** was coming into the world. John was not the light. He had no light in himself. He reflected that true light. The true light means that which is real, is genuine or ideal. The true light is powerful light that searches the hearts of men. It is light that gives life.

There are many false lights around. They appear bright one moment but the next they have faded and disappeared. They attract people for a while like moths to the globe.

We used to have moth trap at the research centre where I worked. A light globe was placed above a garbage can laced with insecticide. I would go out each morning and count the dead moths.

Lots and lots of young people around us – and the not so young – are being attracted to the false lights of the world. What is there end? You know-but are you concerned. We live in a society counting the dead moths. Oh that the true light of the gospel might shine more brightly. Oh that our life, our homes, our church would be reflecting that true light and that many would find the light of life and not death.

The true light gives light to every man. What does this phrase mean? Clearly it does not mean that this light brings spiritual life or inward illumination to every individual. Some, including Calvin, see it as referring to the general revelation of God in the created universe. The revelation by which people should seek God and which renders them without excuse before Him (Romans 1:20).

But the context goes a bit further than this, for it is about the incarnation- about Jesus coming into the world. This true light will reveal the works of men for what they are. This light will reveal the secrets of every heart. This light shines on all and forces a distinction between people. 3:19 *the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.* 3:21 *But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen.* This light shines upon every man whether they see it or not. All will hear the gospel – all will see the light – but not all will accept it.

How are we to respond to the light? We are to **believe**. John testified so that *all through him might believe*. This gospel was written *that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God and that believing you may have life in his name* (20:31). Do you believe? Has that light shone into the depths of your heart? And if so do you reflect that light in the dark world around you?

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