John the Baptist: Preparing the Way
Luke 3:1-20

The account of the births of John the Baptist and of Jesus are done, and Luke has recounted the one episode in Jesus' life as a boy that he wants us to hear, as Jesus stood on the threshold of adulthood. And now Luke fast-forwards to the start of John and Jesus' ministry. And Luke begins by pinpointing when all this began to happen: v1: 'In the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar', so this is 29AD.

And Luke sets out who the key political and religious players were at the time. He starts at the top and works down. Tiberius Caesar was Roman emperor, then Pontius Pilate was his governor over Judea and then there were these three men Herod, Philip and Lysanias who ruled the various regions under Pilate. And then Luke tells us who held the religious power at the time, the Jewish High Priests, Annas and Caiaphas, father and son-in law.

These were the guys with the power: political, military, and religious power, and they used it, everyone of them, for ill. 'But you know what?' says Luke, 'God's message doesn't come through any of them.' V2 'The word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.' All these great names, all these people of power and influence, yet God speaks through John.

The Man from the Desert

And you and I can look at the powerful, or the rich, or the beautiful and think 'man that's where it's happening' and yet God sees it very differently. The real story wasn't happening in the palaces, or the residences of kings and governors, it was happening in the desert as God's word came to a man who had given his life to God and His service. So don't be taken in by the sparkly baubles of the world. That's not where true power or influence lies. God speaks to and through the man or woman who cares enough to get alone with Him and who gives himself or herself to obeying God and His word and telling others about Jesus.

Real success, true success, the success that God thinks is success, may not look like what you think it will look like for you. You see, Jesus said (Luke 7:28) 'I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John.' But you wouldn't believe it if you'd met him. And John ends up in prison for speaking God's word, and is eventually executed. John does not have what we would call a successful life or ministry: he loses all his disciples – to Jesus, he loses his freedom, and finally he loses his life. That's a funny kind of greatness.

There is an attempt at summarizing the gospel that has as its first point: God loves you, and as the second 'and he has a wonderful plan for your life.' Both of which are true, it's just for John and maybe for you that plan meant apparent failure, imprisonment and death. The success that God values may look very different from what we think it looks like, and real influence and power, the influence in people's lives that lasts for eternity, doesn't sit with the kind of people who have stone busts and sculptures made of them like Caesar, it lies with the man or woman who gets alone with God, and hears his word and tells others about Jesus.

Which is what John does as he fulfils the Old Testament prophecies and begins to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah.

Clearing the Way

So Luke sees in John the fulfillment of Isaiah's words, v4: The voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.' And that picture is of a road being prepared through the mountains for the arrival of the king. It's a picture of the workmen clearing a path and cutting through the rock and filling in the holes and getting rid of any obstructions. Now in the UK, when the Queen makes a trip to a town the flags are all put out on the buildings and the streets are swept and the children put on their best school uniforms and crowds of flag waving people line the street.

But how do you prepare the way for God? Because that's who Isaiah and Luke tell us is the coming king. How do you make the crooked road straight and the rough places level? How do you fill in the potholes and clear the obstructions when it's God who is coming?

The answer is: in your heart. The highway that needs preparing is the highway of the heart.

And that's what John begins to do. He starts addressing the issues of people's hearts. And he's not impressed and he's not afraid to say so – and yet people stream out to hear him. Luke tells us in v3 that John 'went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.' He sees right through the shallowness of external religion and calls for heart change. And that's not about words, it's about deeds, it's about life. It's what the Bible calls repentance: turning around, changing your way of thinking in such a way that it changes the way you live.

But you need to see something really important here, and that is that their changed lives wasn't what earned these people forgiveness. Because you could read this and think 'ok; to earn forgiveness to get right with God I need to get my act together, I need to try harder, I need to turn over a new leaf and start doing some good.' But if you think that you're missing the point. You see forgiveness of sins is God's gracious free gift to us, and we can't earn it by trying to impress Him. For both the crowds who flocked to John, and for us, we can be forgiven because of what Jesus did for us at the cross. For them God looked forward to the cross, for us He looks back to the cross but both ways forgiveness is by the sheer good grace of God to us who don't deserve it, because Jesus paid the price for our sins, because He took the punishment that we deserve. And it's all about what Jesus has done for us, not what we can do for him. And for these people who flocked to John it wasn't as if by trying harder and getting their act together and resolving to do better and live a good life from now on that God would wipe their slate clean. No, John makes it clear to them that that changed life, living differently, is the fruit, not the root of being made right with God. That's why he challenges them in v8 'bear fruits in keeping with repentance.' This was John saying 'if God is doing a work in your heart and you're humbling yourself before him, show it by the way you live'. But the heart change comes first, that's the root –what God does in your heart as you turn to him in repentance and faith - and the life change is the fruit, the fruit of a forgiven life.

So regardless of whether you're a Christian or you're not there yet but you know God is drawing you, forgiveness is God's gracious gift to you, you can't and you don't need to earn it, but you can receive it by turning around and putting your trust in what Jesus has done for you and not what you can do for Him.

But this is no easy believe-ism. As if you can say 'o yes I believe and I'll carry on living as I like.' John says it has to show. It's not just lip, its life. It's not just talk, its walk. This baptism he offered them wasn't just another religious rite: tick the box, went forward at that meeting, filled in the card, got my testimony. This was in response to genuine heart change that resulted in genuine life change.

And John provides the crowds with an incentive, a motivator to get right with God and prepare the way in their hearts for His coming and that is that for those who don't respond positively, God is going to come in judgment. And John does some straight talking about Hell: v7: 'who warned you to flee from the wrath to come.' V9 'even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire'. V17: 'the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

Now our modern ears may find the idea of Hell offensive. But the Bible is clear that God's hostility to sin and evil is total. And just listen to how Luke describes John's preaching in v18: 'so with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people.' Now the message of judgement and hell may not sound like good news and if you were there you might well have stood there thinking 'is this good news?' But listen, you know that deep down you want justice to be administered. You read of ethnic cleansing, or child abuse or gross financial mismanagement and know instinctively that that demands justice. And you have this innate feeling of it not being right if people get away with it. The truth is it would be anything but good news if there wasn't going to be a final day of reckoning. And it is wonderful good news to all who care about truth and justice that God is a God of justice who will call all to account.

The problem comes of course when it's us who face the judgement. We're happy with it being other people who we think deserve it, we're much less keen on it being us. But John didn't just preach Hell. It's not as if this life is a one-way road with no u-turns allowed. John's message was: judgment is coming, so make a u-turn while you can. Get yourselves ready for God's coming. It is not inevitable that you have to face judgment, but the choice is yours.

Twenty-three years ago this November a fire-broke out at the Kings Cross Undergound railway station in London. Within the space of a few minutes a dropped cigarette became an inferno. It's said that those who managed to get up the going out escalators tried to warn people at the top not to go down the going down escalators into the fire. They'd escaped, they didn't want anyone else to go unwittingly into the inferno. John the Baptist is that man standing at the top of the escalator urging people to turn around while they could.

But that message of repentance and change is not always welcome. It wasn't then and it isn't now. And Luke presents us here with two ways in which people try and wriggle off the hook.

Don't Turn Off

The first way is how some of the crowd are tempted to respond. You see some of them, and judging from the other gospels it was the most religious ones amongst them, they start to put their defense shield up to try and keep what John is saying to them from getting through to their hearts: after all, they're Jews, they're children of Abraham, they're good people, God's chosen people, God's not going to judge us, it's everyone else He's going to judge, and they deserve it. And John says in v8 'don't even begin to say to yourselves 'we have Abraham as our father.' Don't use that excuse.

Now, today, you and I, or our friends, are unlikely to use that one, but we'll go for something similar: hey I'm good, I'm respectable, I don't do this or that, and anyway I'm middle class and I'm British, and God's an Englishman isn't he? And John says: it's got nothing to do with your heritage: it's your heart. It's not about your family, it's about your faith. It's not about how respectable you are, it's about your relationship with God and whether or not you are right with him. So please, says John, don't make excuses, don't try and deflect this, everyone of us needs to repent and come to God in humility and be made right in His sight and receive His grace and the forgiveness of sins.

But then there's Herod. And he gets challenged and rebuked by John because of his private life, and he sorely resents that. He's not going to have anyone tell him how to live his life, he's not going to have anyone telling him what he can and can't do, that is way too close to the bone. And what does he do? He shuts John down. He imprisons him, and eventually he executes him. He turns off the one voice he needed to hear, the one man who was prepared to tell him the truth, however uncomfortable it was. He silences that voice. And that is so easy to do. You and I, we can shut down the voice of our conscience until it's barely audible. We can shut out the convicting, challenging voice of the Holy Spirit speaking to us, through this book or through others, or by stopping coming to church, because it's all getting too close. But when we do that, we're just in danger of following in Herod's footsteps and closing down the one voice we need to hear. How much better to follow those in the crowd who responded positively and come to John and say 'John, what should we do?'

What would John say to you?

Three different groups of people come forward to John, because this message has touched their hearts, their consciences have been pricked and they know they need to respond and do something about it. They're the crowd, the tax collectors and the soldiers. And they're convicted, their consciences are sore, and they want to know what they should do. If they are to get in step with God, what's that going to look like John?

And the first thing I want you to see is that in not one of these three cases does John say they need to become like him and quit their jobs and pursue his kind of

ascetic lifestyle or calling. He calls each of them to repentance and to live that out in God-honouring ways within their vocation. And whilst God may call some of you into what is called fulltime Christian work, and if He does you need to obey that call, the vast majority of us are called to full-time Christian living and working within our current vocation. Living out what it means to be a disciple of Jesus in the work place and the home. You don't need to eat locusts and wear a camel hair shirt to be a man or woman sent by God: its about how you raise your kids, how you treat your employees, how you balance the budget, how you clinch that deal, how you respond to your customers complaints.

And the one theme that runs through John's advice to these 3 groups is: be different and show that by the way you treat others.

To the crowd John said v11 'Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.' In other words, care for your neighbour, physically care for those without. You're not made right with God by doing that, it's not the root, but it is most definitely the fruit. And John's saying 'turn away from that mentality that says 'it's mine and I'm keeping it.' Don't allow shirts, or money or possessions to have that kind of a hold on you. Turn your back, he says, on selfishness and accumulating stuff and holding on and living in excess. Don't be squeezed into the world's thinking when it comes to your possessions, be the kind of generous, cheerful giver God loves.

Then came the tax collectors, and these guys were seriously despised by their fellow Jews, because they were collaborators with the occupying Romans and they made a profit out of others' loss. And John doesn't tell them to quit he tells them to be different, to do their work honestly v13: 'collect no more than you are authorized to do'. Be different from all the other tax collectors. Stand out from the crowd. Swim against the flow: no kickbacks, no surcharges, no profiteering, no bribes, don't be or become like every other tax collector. Let your light shine even in the tax office.

Then there were the soldiers, and these were probably the Jewish soldiers who guarded the tax collectors, so they faced their own temptations to abuse their power and authority and John says v14 'do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.' And in doing so he hits the temptations that those in positions of authority and influence face on the head: the possibility to abuse it and to allow discontent with your lot to gain ground in your heart. Lack of contentment is what drives the desire and the lust for more: to have what this person over here has, to have the trappings of power or promotion: bigger house, more expensive car, younger wife. But John says 'don't be squeezed into their mold. Be content. Don't allow discontent to drive you.'

Now for the tax collectors and the soldiers, John homes in on the temptations that would have been common to their vocation. But what would he say to you? What would he pick out for you in your situation, and say 'be different in this area'? What would he say to those of you who are single? Would he speak to the issue of your own self-worth and the temptation to find intimacy in the wrong

places? What would he say to those of you men who travel a lot for work and spend nights, weeks away from home? For those of you who face the seemingly never-ending treadmill of having to publish more research papers, what temptations would he pick out for you? For those of you in positions of authority and influence in the university or business, how would he call you to be different from those around you in the way you treat others? Those of you ladies who have given up your careers to raise a family, what would he home in on? Would it be the tendency to despair, or the feeling of waste, or would it be pride that you're doing pretty well and so much better than someone else. What would he say to me? There are going to be some general things that we all share, but there may be some specific areas that you know now you need to repent of and receive God's grace and ask for His forgiveness and His power and strength to start living differently from those around you.

But don't stop at what John would say, because he was always pointing forward to someone greater to come.

Don't stop at John

Because some people did. In Luke's second volume, Acts, Luke records how Paul came across some disciples who hadn't seemed to progress past John's baptism of repentance or received the Holy Spirit. They had got so far but then got stuck, and Paul sets about telling them about Jesus. And that would have made John very happy.

Because with the start of John's ministry the place is abuzz with expectation: v15 'and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ'. Is John the messiah, is he going to be the Christ, is he what were looking for? And John wastes no time in pointing them away from himself to Jesus. In v 16 John says 'he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.' I'm not the answer John says, there is one coming who is mightier than me and I'm not fit to wipe the donkey dung from off his feet. What's more, I just baptize you with water, he is going to baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

I'm not the King, John says, I've come to get you ready for the King. John's goal, his sole aim was to have people ready to meet Jesus. Now today you or your friends are unlikely to get stuck at John like those disciples in Ephesus that Paul met. But you might get stuck at religion. To get so far, to start coming to church, to have some interest in God and the gospel but never get through to Jesus. But it's Jesus that you need. It's not in John or in religion, or in trying to turn your life around but in Jesus that you can find forgiveness of sin, a changed life and certain future you're looking for.