A Voice in the Wilderness
Matthew 3:1-12

Now occasionally you'll hear the expression said of someone that they've 'burst on the scene.' Maybe it's a sportsman, or an actress – but just a few weeks ago they were virtual unknowns, but now, they've taken the field by storm and everyone's talking about them. They've burst on the scene.

And whilst he was no actor or sportsman, in all four gospels John the Baptist sure bursts on the scene. And Matthew opens chapter 3 by saying, v1, 'In those days John the Baptist came…' And 25 or more years have passed since Joseph moved his young family to Nazareth. And during those years we have heard virtually nothing about Jesus. But if 25 years seems long, it's been 400 years since Israel heard from God through a prophet. Four hundred years of silence. Until John bursts on the scene.

Today we're going to look at his ministry, his message and his master.

His Ministry
Well Matthew tells us that John 'came preaching' (v1). So he's gone down in history, and Matthew calls him here, John the Baptist, but what really drew the crowds to him, what made him stand out from the crowds, was his preaching. And that's how John saw himself. You see, when people asked him who he was he replied, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness" (John 1:23). Who am I? I'm a voice.

Now do you remember the gramophone and record label company called, His Master's Voice? And do you remember their trademark picture? It was a dog sitting listening to the horn of a gramophone, as it played a recording of his master's voice.

And when John described himself as a voice he's making a statement, isn't he? That he's come as a messenger of his master. And that what matters about John is not John himself, it's not the messenger, but the message. Now how does that compare to today? You see today image is crucial, isn't it? We live in an age where style has pretty much triumphed over substance. And in our celebrity culture it's all about the messenger.

But John was from a different mould, wasn't he? He didn't come to draw attention to himself. He came as a voice, as a man with a message.

And when he called himself a voice, he was quoting the passage in Isaiah 40 that Matthew quotes here in v3, 'For this is he who was spoken by the prophet Isaiah when he said, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight."'

Now when you drive in France, have you noticed those road signs warning you of potholes ahead: 'Trous en formation'. Don't you just love that! 'Holes in training'. I just wish they'd graduate, so someone could come along and fill them in. Well, in John's day, if a king came to visit a city, the roads would be repaired, the holes would be filled in, just as today the red carpet would be rolled out.

You see, if you look at the whole of Isaiah 40 that Matthew quotes here, Isaiah talks of speaking tenderly, speaking comfort to God's people, that the days of warfare are over, that her iniquity is pardoned, that a new day is dawning, that the Lord is coming. And though the Lord comes with might to rule, he comes as a shepherd, gathering his lambs in his arms, carrying them close to his chest. And in preparation for his coming,

a voice will cry out in the wilderness. And John and Matthew are saying that he is that voice, calling people like you and me to repair the roads of our hearts for the coming of the king.

But it wasn't just John's words that preached was it? You see, even John had a certain style, and the way he lived and dressed, that also preached a message didn't it? Because it always does. One of the things we've told our girls is that everyone is preaching at them. It's not just Dad who preaches, every one preaches – by the way they live, by the way they behave, by what they value – whether it's friends, or teachers, or youth leaders, or films or TV – everyone's preaching a message about what matters most in life. The question is what they preach.

So look at v4, 'Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.' Now we know that some of the religious leaders of the day made a thing of appearance – they wanted to look good in the eyes of others. And if we're honest, it's easy to get preoccupied with appearance, isn't it? And we can spend hours and thousands beautifying the outside, but spending little time on the inside. Now, don't get me wrong, the outside matters. When in a few weeks time I walk Naomi down the aisle, she won't be wearing camel's hair; and if Lukas does, he's in trouble! I mean, beauty is good, isn't it? And it's good because our appreciation of beauty is God given, because he is the ultimate creator of beauty. And when you experience the 'wow' of beauty you are experiencing a faint echo of worship, that when you see beauty and recognise it, you are seeing a dim reflection of his beauty. But true beauty always begins on the inside and radiates outwards. And John knew that ultimately it's not the external but the internal things of the heart that matter.

But there was another reason John dressed as he did. You see, in 2 Kings 1:8 the prophet Elijah was described as wearing 'a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist.' And in very last words of the Old Testament, the Lord spoke through the prophet Malachi, saying, 'Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes' (Mal 4:5). And so by the way he dressed, John was reminding people of Elijah, he was saying that the day when the Lord would visit his people had come.

Which was why he said the things he said.

His Message
Verses 1-2, 'John the Baptist came preaching… "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."'

So John declares and links two things together. And the first is a call to repent. And it is a call, isn't it? It's an imperative. It's not a suggestion. John didn't say, 'you know, you might like to consider repenting, if it's not too much trouble.' No, he calls everyone to repent.

But what does he mean by that? I mean, do you remember what Humpty Dumpty said about words? Well, in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass,* Humpty Dumpty says to Alice, 'When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more or less.' But when it comes to God and the things of God, you can't have a Humpty-Dumpty approach to life and to words, can you? You can't think 'well I can

make a word like repent mean what ever I want it to mean.' So what does John mean by 'repent'?

Well, literally, the word meant *to change your mind*. But in the Bible it means much more than that. Just listen to Isaiah again: "Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon" (Isaiah 55:6-7).

In other words, repentance results in profound change in your life that goes deeper than simply changing your mind on something. It means to acknowledge the road I'm walking on – is not God's road. That it's away from him not towards him; that the whole bent of my life is wrong; that I'm off course.

And so this isn't just a minor adjustment in your life, is it? It's not adding a little bit of spirituality to your day, like sprinkling a bit of seasoning on your food. Repentance means a fundamental realignment of your life. It's like a 180-degree turn in the direction of travel of your heart, from walking your own way, away from God, to walking on his way and towards him.

And because of that, true repentance is like a death sentence on my self-sufficiency, isn't it. It's this very real acknowledgement that you and I cannot do life on our own. And that means that it's not a one-off event. I mean have you ever seen someone wearing one of those Tough Mudder t-shirts? It's the badge of honour – I did it. But repentance isn't like doing a Tough Mudder. It's not a one off 'been there, done that, got the t-shirt.' Because whilst there is going to be a time when you genuinely, sincerely repent for the first time, for the person who wants to draw near to God daily, every day is going to be a day of repentance.

You see, repentance moves you away from putting yourself on a pedestal to being much more humble about yourself, because you're much more aware of the sin remaining in your life. It makes you slow to criticise others, and when you do correct others, you'll do it out of humility and love, not arrogance, because you know you too need to repent. And because it recognises that only God can ultimately satisfy our hearts it draws us away from the false securities and idols we like to put our trust in, and sends us to the Lord. So repentance clears the barricades of the roads to our hearts, so the king can enter in.

But there is an alternative to repentance, isn't there? You see Matthew tells us that the response to John's preaching was extraordinary: v5, 'then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptised by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.' But the Pharisees and Sadducees, the religious leaders got a very different welcome from John: "you brood of vipers!" (v7) – it's not exactly what you call seeker-sensitive, is it!

And that's because they weren't seeking, were they. At least they weren't genuine. Instead John says they were presuming. Verse 9: "Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father'" (v9). So the tragedy of their position was that they were falling back on an alternative to genuine repentance. They thought that their heritage, their racial background exempted them from the need to repent. Plus, the Pharisees prided themselves on their religious observance, and the

Sadducees on the fact that they were the true descendants of Zadok, King David's High Priest.

But the trap they fell into is just as dangerous for you and me, isn't it? I mean, think what's going on with them? They pride themselves on what they believe and teach. But saying you believe the right things, is no alternative to deep, heart-felt repentance for your sin, is it? Or, because of their attitude to the Law of Moses, some of them considered themselves morally superior to others. And religion can make you think that you're doing better than others. But that kind of self-righteous pride, pride in your performance, is something to be repented of, not something over which to be proud. And yet, can't we all be guilty of it at times? Or they prided themselves on their tribal or national allegiance. And aren't there times when we can think ourselves better than others because of our political persuasion – thank God I'm not like those lefties, or those conservatives - or of our nationality or culture? Or the Sadducees put pride in their social status and connections. But have you ever caught yourself thinking well of yourself because of your position or who you know? And that is no substitute for humbling oneself before God in repentance.

You see, one of the extraordinary things going on here is that John was baptising Jews. Because up until now in Judaism, baptism was for gentiles who wanted to become Jews. But by baptising his fellow Jews, John is saying that their racial, cultural, religious heritage was not enough. That everyone, gentile and Jew, needs cleansing and a new start. We all do.

But why? Why should any of us bother repenting? Why do it for the very first time, and why make it a daily practice in your life?

Well, that's the second thing John proclaims, v2, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Why should you repent? Because God's kingdom is near, because God's rule and reign has broken into our world.

You see, imagine a city that's been in rebellion against its rightful king. For years they've kept the king and his forces out of the city, but now the king and his armies have broken through the outer wall. But he still loves his people and because he wants to avoid any further bloodshed, he calls on the people to surrender, to lay down their arms, and if they do they will receive a free and full pardon, and become his citizens, and enjoy all the blessings of his reign. And John is saying that the king has broken through, that he's at the city gate – so repent, accept his offer of peace, don't continue in your rebellion.

So, it's interesting isn't it: repentance knows nothing of a foot in both camps, does it. I mean imagine two of those moving walkways at the airport – placed right next to each other, but going in opposite directions. Imagine trying to walk on both of them at the same time. Or imagine trying to ski downhill at the same time as trying to take one of those kiddies moving carpets uphill. You just can't do it. And it is the same with God and with life. You cannot be both a rebel and a true citizen. You cannot claim God as your king, whilst living life your way. And yet many of us try, don't we. Maybe even you try. But if you do, you'll never be truly happy. As someone said, you'll have too much of God to be happy in your sin and too much of sin to be happy in God.

But the kingdom has come, John says, and that fact calls for us to repent. And if we fail to respond rightly to this breaking in of God's reign, there will be tragic consequences. Verse 10, "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." As CS Lewis said, 'There are two kinds of people: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, 'All right, then, have it your way.'

You see, one danger for us in our age is to think that God is not all that bothered by our sin, and if it does bother him, well it's just because he's concerned about the damage it will do us. Now to be sure sin does damage us. Living in a way you were never designed to live will damage your life like trying to run a diesel engine on unleaded will wreck the engine. But to see sin first and foremost as a sin against ourselves, is to totally miss what John and the rest of the Bible says. That it is an affront to God's rule and reign – a slight on his glory. And if that is what we want, God says, 'well have it your way.' And then hell becomes a place of our choosing.

Ok, but how is the kingdom of heaven breaking in?

His Master

Listen to what John says in v11, "I baptise you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I." So John knew that his message and his ministry was about someone else. That it's in Jesus that the kingdom of God was breaking into the world.

And look how John describes him: he is 'mightier than I.' Now, John was no lightweight was he. Here was the man of whom Jesus said there had been no greater prophet, under whose preaching cities and regions turned back to God, and he says that one stronger, and greater in power is coming. And to bring that home he says of Jesus in v11, 'whose sandals I am not worthy to carry.'

Now I don't know how clean your shoes are this morning, but a pair of 1st century sandals would have been covered in dust and dirt and donkey dung. They would have been so gross that even though a disciple of a rabbi was supposed to serve his rabbi as a virtual slave, it was considered too humiliating to have him take off the rabbi's sandals. That could only ever be asked of the lowest of slaves. And John is saying, I don't even deserve to do that for Jesus. In comparison to him, I am lower than the lowest of the low. You see whilst today you and I are always in danger of thinking too highly of ourselves, when you have met Jesus and looked into his face, you can't think too lowly of yourself, can you?

Because who was it that John was preparing the way for? You see, when in Isaiah 40, which Matthew quotes, he says 'prepare the way of the LORD' (Is 40:3) – Isaiah used God's personal, relational, covenant name – YHWH. So Matthew, and John, apply to Jesus something Isaiah applied to God. That was how they saw Jesus. That was why John humbled himself before him, that was why he was so unworthy, that was why the Kingdom has come and we must repent, because God, the King of heaven and earth has come.

And whilst John baptised with water, he says in v11-12 that Jesus 'will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with

unquenchable fire.' Now fire can both destroy and purify can't it? Fire can burn your house down, but it can also purify silver in a crucible. So when John talks about Jesus baptising with the Holy Spirit and fire, and burning up the chaff, does he mean that for those who repent Jesus will begin the work of purifying their lives? Or does he mean that for those who refuse to repent there will be what Hebrews calls 'a fearful expectation of judgement, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries' (Heb 10:27)?

And the answer is, both. You see, Jesus has always been divisive hasn't he? And if the kingdom of heaven is at hand, and if the king has come, we must decide whether we will be those who pray from sincere, if wobbly hearts, – 'your will be done, your kingdom come', or whether we will be those who want to keep control and say 'no, my will be done, my kingdom come. Jesus, you can take second place.' But whichever path we take, there is a destination awaiting us at the end, isn't there? The question is, which path are you on? And if you're placing your trust in Jesus and not in yourself, and looking to him, then you can have the confidence of knowing you're pointing in the right direction, with all the security that brings. But if you're not, then listen to John's warnings.

But John also knew that what he was offering was just a symbol of the real heart cleansing Jesus would bring about. The kind of heart transformation that began with the Spirit coming in fire at Pentecost.

But maybe you look at your life and see little evidence of that kind of change. And you see areas of your life where you know you need the Spirit's purifying fire to burn up the chaff – the chaff of anger, or lust or jealousy, or greed. How can Jesus light that purifying fire in your heart?

Well, when the disciples James and John wanted positions of prominence Jesus asked them, 'are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptised with the baptism with which I am baptised?' (Mark 10:38). Elsewhere he said, 'I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! I have a baptism to be baptised with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!' (Luke 12;49-50).

You see, at the cross Jesus underwent a baptism of fire. And he was crushed for our iniquities, and he became like chaff in the winnowing of God, and he threw himself into the firestorm of God's wrath so that you and I might never need to face it. And when you see him like that it begins to change your heart. You begin to love him more and your sin less. Sin loses its shine in the light of the glory of Christ, and the purifying fire of the Spirit does its work.

As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 3:18: 'We all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.' So turn around, repent, and see the glory of Christ, and let your love for him grow and your love for self and for sin shrink.