

Revolution by the Jordan

Today is the second Sunday of January, and the second Sunday of January is almost always the Sunday we know as the Baptism of the Lord – when, as we heard in our reading from Luke’s gospel today, when we celebrate Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River by his cousin John.

Luke grounds the event in history, when he sets the scene at the beginning of chapter 3, telling us: “It was the fifteenth year of the rule of Emperor Tiberius [...] the word of God came to John son of Zachariah in the wilderness” (3:1-2)

John, the son of Zachariah, who we know better as John the Baptist, was the first prophet to the nation of Israel for a long, long time. His mission was to prepare the way of the Lord, to prepare the people to receive his cousin – Jesus – as their messiah.

And we should remember that nation of Israel in John’s time was not prepared for Jesus. They had been expecting a messiah for a long time, of course, but not a messiah like Jesus.

Throughout Israel’s history, God would raise up prophets amongst them, who would speak God’s word, and guide the nation. Ultimately, of course, they believed that God would raise up a Messiah. By Jesus’ time, they held that this Messiah, literally an ‘anointed one’ – a leader, a king, to cast out the Roman occupiers and restore the nation as it was under King David.

We heard, in this morning’s Isaiah reading, that " For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour" (Is 43:3a) and " Do not fear, for I am with you" (43:5a).

But by John’s time, this didn’t seem to be happening: by the time John started preaching and baptising, prophets speaking to the nation was a distant memory. If we look at a bible, it’s only a few pages from the Old Testament book of Malachi, to the first pages of the New Testament, with John the Baptist appearing in chapter three of Matthew’s gospel... but it was hundreds of years. To the people in that time, it seemed that God was silent.

For them, for God’s chosen people, the very children of Abraham, it seemed they were deserted by God. God who was their God – their God who’d remembered them in slavery in Egypt, their God who’d guided them

across the wilderness to the Promised Land, their God who'd defeated their enemies, their God who'd rescued them from exile in Babylon.

By John's time, they were in the Promised Land, and they had the Second Temple. But it wasn't really their land anymore – it was now the Roman province of Judea, and the Romans were running the place, whatever was left of the nation of Israel existed at the pleasure of Rome – and for the benefit of Rome.

It wasn't by any stretch of the imagination what the people wanted or expected.

And against this background, John the son of Zechariah appeared. John wasn't the messiah, he wasn't marching at the head of a column of soldiers, he wasn't attacking the Romans. He was, as Luke 3:3 tells us, “preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.” It was revolutionary, but not revolutionary in the way the nation of Israel expected.

In their tradition, baptism and repentance weren't the way to forgiveness and to God's favour – the way to God's favour was by not sinning – and the people would go to great lengths to avoid doing anything in contravention of the law... but if they did do the wrong thing, as they inevitably would do, they had to make sacrifices – and they would have to do that through the priests.

But now, in the wilderness, John was telling them something very different – it wasn't about obedience and sacrifices – instead it was something easier, and also more difficult: they had to do something they thought they'd never have to do. In John's time, Baptism was a practise reserved for gentile converts to Judaism. A Jewish person would never be baptised. Far from being special before God though, John said that they would have to humble themselves, washing themselves like mere gentiles...

It was a harsh message: The people were being told they could no longer rely on their ancestry; the ancestry that they knew gave them a special relationship with God, an entitlement unique amongst all the people of the world! John said that they – just like the gentiles – needed to be baptised, that they were somehow no longer special in God's eyes; John told them that they needed to repent!

Repent! Imagine that! The way to forgiveness was stopping doing what was wrong!

This was hardly a message of good news, but people came, not just a handful, but crowds (Lk 3:7, 3:10, 3:15) some translations use the word ‘multitudes’ and that gives us an idea of how large the crowds would have been.

John’s message was harsh, and it was revolutionary, but we read that the crowds came anyway. Just like the crowds who would later flock to hear Jesus. But think about this: John preached, and John baptised, but that is all he did.

There were no miraculous healings, there were no raisings from the dead, no walking on water, no casting out of demons, none of the things that would later attract the crowds to Jesus’ ministry. Instead, John was just a man, in the wilderness, speaking the word of God.

So, far from John preparing the way of the Lord by simply saying “Hey, guys, Jesus is coming” he was preparing the way of the Lord in the people’s hearts, readying the people for the message that Jesus would bring – that the kingdom of God was at hand – and readying the people for a revolutionary messiah.

The people came, they listened, they repented, and they were baptised. And only then did they begin to rethink what the messiah might be and what he might do.

From today’s reading, Luke 3:15, “The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah.”

It’s interesting, isn’t it, that even though John’s message to the people is that they shouldn’t be complacent, and that they couldn’t rely on their heritage, that the people still expected the Messiah – although, in them asking the question of John, you can see that their expectation of who the Messiah would be has shifted. It’s possible, they had grasped, that far from the Messiah being a warrior and a liberator, that the Messiah might be man in the desert, simply bringing the word of God.

And then John responds with the famous words “I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose

sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

This is something entirely new: It’s easy to baptise with water, but in the context of John’s listeners how do you baptise with the Holy Spirit? How do you baptise with fire?

But John didn’t stop there: He says, “His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Christians often spin this statement, and others like it, in all sorts of ways. Because the message is an uncomfortable one. Some will have this showing the unbelievers burning eternally in Hell, some will have our characters being held up before God with all our shortcomings being nicely (and quite painlessly) burned away.

But I think the main point of this verse is not about the nature of judgement. Rather, it’s about the one, the Messiah, who is going to judge. John emphasises his earlier point, that the people of Israel can’t rely on the fact that Abraham is their father to avoid God’s judgement.

And without becoming preoccupied by the nature of the judgement, we should know that judgement is coming, that it is God’s judgement, and that the people of Israel, or for that matter us today, cannot rely on inherited ‘rights’ to save us from that judgement.

In verse 18, we read “And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.” – so the judgement that John spoke of was not just something that would happen, but judgement formed part of the good news.

And we can get hung up, on the nature of the judgement, and who will be punished, or who should be punished and so on. But we need to take a step back, we don’t do the judgement.

It’s a theme that comes up often in the gospels, and Paul’s letters, the judgement is not up to us. A few chapters later, Jesus warns us to not judge or we will be judged Luke 6:37,

Luke tells us in verse 21: “When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptised too....”

Jesus came to be baptised. And when he did, John recognised him – which is not necessarily something supernatural, because they were cousins after all, famously, with the words recorded in John’s gospel, “Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”

The fact that Jesus came to be baptised might seem odd – because we know John’s baptism was of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, so why should Jesus be baptised? What did Jesus have to repent from or be forgiven for?

Well, nothing, but in being baptised he took his place with the people he came to save, right at the beginning of his ministry he effectively says “I’m with these guys”. Jesus is with us.

In his baptism, Jesus took his place with the people, and took on himself the burden of the people, our burden. The burden which we know would ultimately be lifted upon his death on the cross.

And remember, that Messiah literally means ‘annointed’ – and so we can also understand John’s baptising of Jesus as his anointing as the Messiah, (or ‘the Christ’ to use the Greek term).

After the baptism, Luke gives us some more very famous words:

“...And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased””.

When we read that God the Father says “...with you I am well pleased” there is a tendency to read it to mean “Good job, son, well done”, but if we read it as “my favour rests on you” we can get a better understanding. Jesus is truly God’s chosen one.

And this brings us back to the people of Israel, who had confidently known themselves to be God’s chosen people.

But God’s favour doesn’t arrive by virtue of inheritance. It doesn’t arrive by virtue of who our father was, or what our surname is, or the nation of our birth. God’s favour arrives through Jesus. And only through Jesus.

As Jesus said “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6)

John had preached in the wilderness: a baptism for the forgiveness of sins. John had challenged people to turn away from their old ways, and turn to God. He prepared the way of the Lord: he prepared people by baptising them with water; he prepared people with a revolutionary message. He prepared the people for Jesus. He prepared the way of the Lord.

And that's what we need to do. We need to work to prepare the way of the Lord today.

Just like John.

And just like John, what we have is a message. A message that is radical, a message that is often ridiculed, but it's a message that brings hope, and it's a message that truly is good news. Good news for all the people of the world.

I take that to heart as we enter into new year. Our congregation isn't as big as it once was, and as was pointed out to me several times in the last week – we're all getting older! We might be unlikely messengers, as John was, but we still carry the good news of Jesus, we scan till share the good news that God loves us so much that he sent his only son to be our saviour, goes on.

And so, as we look to the future, we trust in our revolutionary messiah, and as we do that, we sing to the God of salvation.

Amen.