

Straight to the point

¹ In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴ As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

*'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.*

⁵ Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall become straight,
and the rough places shall become level ways,

⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

⁷ He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" ⁸ Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.

⁹ 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."

¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, "What then shall we do?" ¹¹ And he answered them, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise." ¹² Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" ¹³ And he said to them, "Collect no more than you are authorized to do." ¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages."

¹⁵ As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, ¹⁶ John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

¹⁸ So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people. ¹⁹ But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, ²⁰ added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison. (Luke 3:1-20 ESV)

You get the feeling that John the Baptist was quite an abrasive fellow. I wonder whether it was the camel hair tunic or the diet of locusts and wild honey? Perhaps we shouldn't consider the externals as the cause but in keeping, I dare say, with all of God's prophets there is a passion and a fervour that just has to be expressed. I wonder whether John felt like Jeremiah who said: 'If I say, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name," there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.' (Jer 20:9)? Born to Elizabeth and Zechariah in special circumstances, John was prepared by God to be his messenger – the last of the prophets – 'Among those born of women there has arisen no one greater', Jesus would say (Matt 11:11) – to prepare the way of the Lord – and so he called it as he saw it. Repent!

His call went out to all stratas of society and he weathered and suffered the political and religious politics of his day in his call for genuine repentance. It seems even then religious tourism, following the latest fad was common practice and John saw this and cut through the play acting or religious shopping and looked for personal responses – not just the talk variety but the lifestyle version. This call was not just to certain groups but all people heard his fervour and fire and there were genuine questions – from tax collectors notorious for the bonus paid to themselves – and soldiers, often laws unto themselves and able to do what they wish – and practical, pertinent advice was given. Repentance is not just this private chat between you and God but involves lifestyles – even at work. And none of this is easy – it always involves consequences, struggles, hardship, even as there might be experiences of peace and joy in one's relationship with God.

The scenes John stirred caused people to wonder whether John in fact was the Messiah and he characteristically sets the people straight – No. I'm not even worthy to undo his bootstraps! He will

come with real power. Even John's picture of the Messiah has an 'edge' to it – winnowing fork, threshing floor, harvest, wheat into barn, chaff into fire – and for emphasis, *unquenchable* fire. And Luke records that this was how John 'preached good news to the people'.

This description of the coming of Jesus and in truth what Jesus went onto accomplish and what happens finally when he comes again is not culturally appropriate it seems today. The so-called days of 'hell fire and brimstone' have given way to God's graciousness and inclusiveness. It seems to me that while one could be painted too starkly and imply that we can work our way to heaven by repentance and many deeds, people can't be scared into the kingdom – not really, it falls apart eventually and God is no bully – the other is painted too pristinely and implies that we don't have to do anything because it is God's business to save – we don't even have to repent – not really, really – 'cause heaven is ok but hell is ... uncomfortable. The history of the Christian Church and its theological expressions are an example of pin balls bouncing off buffers as we react, respond, and over-correct an emphasis or error. As Lutherans we say that we've got a clear and true set of teachings in the Book of Concord – our Confessions – as Lutherans we would say that – but as Lutherans let us also remember the discussions and fights that occurred over 50 years 'getting things right' (according to us).

John wanted people to be ready to meet and receive and respond to the Messiah – to engage with him, follow him – to live in his kingdom. The context is that we are sinners and God rescues; not we are helpless victims drowning an ocean waiting to be collected. Sin is understood to be rebellion, to be missing the mark, to be defilement. Today people would prefer to think of themselves as separate from the bad things they do – much more victim-like – while biblically that distinction between person and deed is not as clear cut. If I do 'bad' things, yes, I'm a sinner. If I do 'good' things, yes, I'm a sinner. My sin infects and affects me and everything about me – thoughts, words, deeds, relationships – all are stained. Consequently when rescued and restored by Jesus, in the new creation when repentance becomes the lifestyle then likewise it also affects not just me but everything about me – thoughts, words, deeds, relationships.

John spoke before the cross was lifted up with Jesus on it. We live after it – that deciding moment in human history – where death and hell and the Devil were taken on, battled, and defeated. Behind our talk of grace and love, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, justification and faith stands this reality.

I am not calling for people to work their way to heaven by repenting and doing good but I do wonder whether we should be more up front with people – our young people in particular – by telling them how hard it is to struggle to be obedient, to be faithful, to resist temptation as we walk in Jesus' footsteps. I wonder if the church's advertising should be more 'Christianity? Only the tough survive!?' or 'Jesus said take up your cross and follow me – I dare you.'

Clear preaching of law and gospel, clear administration of the sacraments would soon show the disciple of Jesus who the tough one really is – look to the cross – and how taking up one's cross is only possible with the power that comes from God – power (and wisdom) most clear seen in the cross. The struggle is never by oneself. Jesus is present to help. If he's not, it's not because he's stopped but because we have pushed him away or ignored him or whatever. Nevertheless, what John called for, what I do as well, and what each person who has suffered because of our sin wants – is not talk but action – repentance – change of behaviour, struggle to be obedient to the Lord of heaven and hell. And if that at times has an abrasive quality about it then so be it, our sin needs to be roughed up at times!