

John the Baptist

Readings: Isaiah 40:1-11 & Matthew 3:1-17

This morning I'd like first of all to set the story of John the Baptist in its context and then go on to look at the man, his ministry and his message. So we'll have three m's this morning – man, ministry and message. Then we'll finish with some take home thoughts.

It is very important that we see the story of John the Baptist as part of God's unfolding story and in its historical setting. You cannot really understand John or, even Jesus for that matter, unless you see them in the light of the unfolding story of the Old Testament. Yes by grace we are New Testament people, but God did not just close the book of the Old Testament and start writing a new one from scratch, it's all part of an unfolding story. Matthew, Mark and Luke take space to firmly put the ministry of John the Baptist as the fulfilment of the prophesy of Isaiah 40 v 3 "A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God." This was also the testimony of John the Baptist himself as recorded in John's gospel. In response to those who asked who he was, he said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said." (John 1:23). But not only do we need to see the unfolding story of the Scriptures, we also need to understand the world into which John strode.

Over the previous centuries the Jews had developed a belief that God would intervene in the affairs of the world - this was to be the coming day of the Lord. The time of the restoration of the Davidic Kingdom but it would be also a time of judgement. But during the intertestamental period this developed further into a belief in the new age, when God Himself would step into history in some cataclysmic event and usher in the new age of justice and righteousness when God would rule. The Jewish people had been disappointed by the return from their exile in Babylon, they were still under the rule of foreign powers. Although the Temple had been rebuilt, both the ark of the covenant and the shekinah cloud of glory were missing from the Temple. It was as if the exile was still going on. Although they had a brief period of independence under the Maccabees in about 160 BC, by the time of John they had been under foreign domination for about 90 years, in this case by the might of Rome. Yet many in Israel still nursed the hope of the day of the Lord, the new age when God would reign. They were passionately looking forward to what God would do, there was a deep longing. Every so often someone would arise claiming to be the Messiah or a revolutionary leader, and gather a few followers, but it would all come to nothing. It was into this mixture of expectation and disappointment, that out in the desert stepped a wild figure of a man - John the Baptist - with his strange set of clothes and an even stranger diet. John's preaching was a real wake up call. He announces that God's rule is about to happen and challenges his hearers – are you ready? Get your lives in order because the kingdom of heaven is immanent and about to break in. This was dynamite.

So having placed John in Scripture and in his world, let's look at **the man himself**. Luke's gospel chapter 1 tells us he was blessed as a child by being raised by godly parents. His father was a priest and John would also have been expected to become a priest. God, it seems had other ideas. Luke's account of his birth suggests that his mother Elizabeth and his father Zechariah were well on in years when they had John, so it may well be that they had died before he began his desert ministry. In terms of timing, this is probably about 27-29 AD.

The voice of accepted prophesy had been silent for several hundred years, it had ended with the words of Malachi "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the

great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.” (Mal. 4:5-6). And now the people are startled by this man in the desert who is speaking with all the authority and power of one their prophets of old. Not only that, but he is even dressed like Elijah. In 2 Kings we read that when King Ahaziah, the son of King Ahab, was sick, he sent some messengers to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron, whether he would recover. Ekron was one of the five Philistine towns. But, on the way, the messengers met Elijah who had a stark message for the king. ‘Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron? Now therefore thus says the LORD, you shall not come down from the bed to which you have gone up, but you shall surely die.’” (2 Kings 1:3-4). So King Ahaziah asked his messengers about the man who met them and told them these things. They answered him, “He wore a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist.” And the King said, “It is Elijah the Tishbite.” Elijah, the prophet, feared by Ahaziah’s father, Ahab, and hated by his mother, Jezabel. And here in Matthew we have John the Baptist dressed similarly and just as outspoken.

I find John an amazing character because he manages to combine fearless outspokenness, with humility, something of a rare combination in our world. He dared to speak up and condemn Herod’s adulterous relationship. Herod had abandoned his wife and then took his half-brother’s wife Herodias. Needless to say she nursed a grudge against John and was indirectly responsible for his beheading. Even some of the Pharisees and Sadducees John called “a brood of vipers”. He didn’t mince his words, they came with the power of truth. Yet John was humble in the way he spoke of his relationship to the one who was to come after him. “I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry.” (Matt. 3:11). And again John’s testimony about Jesus was “He must increase and I must decrease” (John 3:30). John realised that he was a signpost, or if you like, he was the supporting act and the second main act was to follow after him.

Jesus spoke highly of John. He said “what then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, “Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.’ Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.” (Matt. 11:9-11). Although John, himself, did not appear to believe that he was the Elijah figure who was to come, Jesus was quite definite in chapter 17 of Mathew’s gospel. “But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased.” Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.” (Matt. 17:12-13). Sadly of course, the present day Jews are still looking for Elijah to come before their Messiah appears, and every year at their Passover celebration the youngest child goes to the door of the house to see if Elijah is there.

Secondly, **John’s ministry** had some unique features about it. His ministry was primarily in the wilderness of Judea, which was the region within the Jordan valley to the west of the Jordan river. For those of you who have been there it is very hot and dry. Not the most salubrious of places to start a revival ministry, yet crowds flocked to hear him. Josephus, the Jewish historian, bears witness to the crowds that came to John. You had to make an effort to go and see and hear John, but his location had one key feature, the Jordan river. Here John could baptise people by immersion. John’s baptism was a major innovation to the typical Jewish prophetic ministry for two reasons. Firstly, although baptism was certainly known to the Jews, baptism **was expected of Gentiles** when they became converts to Judaism. It wasn’t for Jews. Secondly, baptism, as normally

practiced, was done by the person themselves as they plunged into the Jewish ritual baths. It wasn't done by someone else. So the fact that John baptised people, meant that although the repentance was the individual's response to John's message, their baptism depended upon the one who baptised. So John could talk about the One who was to follow him who would baptise them with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Here is another major strand of the Old Testament prophecies, the coming of the Spirit of God in the new covenant upon all flesh (Ezek. 36:27, Joel 2:28). Something that the One coming after John would do for them, something they could not do for themselves. You see, you don't achieve grace, you receive it.

Finally let's have a look at **John's message**. John's words have so much of the imagery of Malachi e.g. Malachi chapter 3 verse 2-3 "But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi" and again chapter 4 verse 1 "For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch." Do you see the similar images used in Malachi and those used by John?

So in the light of what is coming, says John – repent, get ready, get your lives in order. David Turner helpfully defines repentance as "the turning of the whole person from sin to God in obedience to the message of the kingdom. This entails recognition of need, sorrow for sin, a decision to turn from sin to God, and a subsequent obedient lifestyle." As Craig Keener further adds, "John is not calling his Jewish audience to regular turning from specific sins but to a radical conversion from an old to a new way of life. A repentance of the sort that, as Jews, they might associate with Gentiles converting to Judaism." So John's call was for a radical, genuine repentance from his Jewish hearers, who are told in no uncertain terms that they cannot just rely on their ancestry, as descended from Abraham. Just being born a Jew does not guarantee a place in God's coming Kingdom. As William Barclay said "we cannot live on the spiritual capital of the past". According to John, God expects to see the fruits of righteousness and justice being manifested in his people here and now. God is coming to burn up the unfruitful and to sort out the wheat from the chaff – John is a preacher who is prepared to give a very uncomfortable message to his people, especially to those religious types who thought they had it altogether, like the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

So we have looked at the man, his ministry and his message but what can we learn today from John the Baptist? Quickly may I suggest four things.

Firstly, God is faithful to His word. God had promised that there would be a voice in the wilderness and in the fullness of time John the Baptist came. God is still working His purposes out now, in our day and age, although His timetable is His alone not ours.

Secondly, there are times when we need the prophetic word, that urgent call to repent, the call for true justice and right dealings, even at times within the corridors of power. Yet, it behoves us to proclaim that word firmly and courageously but with true humility and compassion.

Thirdly, John's message was brought after some years in the desert alone with God, he needed to be alone in the presence of God before he could speak the message of God.

Fourthly, John pointed his hearers to Jesus, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). He was a signpost, may we also be faithful in our day, to point people to Jesus, the Saviour of the world. Amen.