**Sermon** (Luke 3v1-22)

Today, we’re going to think about one of the ‘VIPs’ of the Bible, John- John the cousin of Jesus. (image of John)

Indeed, when Jesus was asked about this guy, he gave him a 5 star rating, saying that until now, no-one greater than John had arisen. High praise indeed!

His ministry of preparing people for the arrival of Jesus is recorded in the Bible because it sheds so much light on who Jesus is, and what he came to do.

It has a second and very real importance for us too today, in that it helps us to know what we are to say to people about Jesus.

Last week we thought about our constant responsibility to be witnesses to Jesus to the whole world. Well, John will help us to know what to say.

John is often known as John the Baptist, and that’s fair enough for – as we’ll see- he did baptise people.

BUT I want to suggest to us that we should see him principally as **a preacher**, since most of this bible passage talks about him in that way since ‘*the word of God came to him’* and he preached that word courageously to all – to the crowds , to groups of people within that crowd, and even to King Herod on his throne.

So come with me to Luke 3 (p1029) and let’s see John first as 1) ‘**A preacher of repentance for the forgiveness of sins’**

In December, we looked at Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus in Chapters 1 and 2 of his gospel.

The chapters are full of visits by angels and miracles, including the unusual conception of both John, and then the virgin birth of Jesus.

The angels, the miracles shouldn’t surprise us because the Almighty God is at work to fulfil his plans to bring his Messiah to his people.

But Chapter 2 ends with the baby Jesus being cuddled by a godly old couple, and then the 12 year old Jesus visiting the Temple in Jerusalem.

Sweet stories, but perhaps a bit of an anti-climax after the angels!

What’s going to happen next, we might wonder, as God’s plans unfold…?

Well, our chapter reveals that BEFORE Jesus does anything, the people need to be prepared for their Messiah’s arrival.

Hopefully that shouldn’t surprise us too much! If King Charles announced that he was going to visit Angmering next year, there would be all manner of preparations made.

So, when God’s Messiah- his Son – the King of Kings is about to hit town, we can expect that people need to be prepared before royalty shows up!

And John is the one whose job it is to make people ready, and he does this by preaching that they need to ‘**repent’** – that is to turn decisively away from their sins, and start treating God with the honour his majesty deserves and living in the right way.

~ I’ve always found a military image helpful to understand what repentance looks like. Imagine a group of soldiers marching in one direction. The burly sergeant major bellows out ‘Repent’ and they turn and go the opposite direction

**That’s** what God had said would need to happen before his Messiah rolled up.

And this is what John is doing. He’s saying that the ONLY way they could have their sins forgiven, and so be ready even to approach the Messiah is if they repent

Do notice at least 3 things about John’s call to repent

* It was incredibly Direct. John doesn’t address them in the calm measured respectful tone that -eg - Sgt Wilson spoke to the troop in Dad’s Army. No he blasts them right between the eyes, calling them a brood of vipers (v7). It isn’t normally a good idea to call people you want to woo snakes, but the time for subtlety is over. The Jews have not been treating God as they should have been, and John’s role is not to flatter them but to call them to change!
* This call is Urgent for the Messiah’s hand is on the door of history and they need to be ready for the turn of the door, and him to arrive. John wants them to be ready, alert and responsive rather than dull, sleepy and resistant
* And I think we’re meant to note the very Practical way in which repentance is to be expressed. It’s not just to be seen in going to services in buildings or reading their OT’s more , but it’s too be shown in their attitude to **money and possessions**

1. Jesus calls the crowd to be **generous** to people in need (v11)
2. Tax collectors are called to be **honest** rather than crooked in their dealings with people (v13)
3. Soldiers are called to be **content** with their pay, and not greedy.

True repentance to God will be seen in generosity, honesty and contentment, John teaches

I’m not sure that John would have been comfortable to listen to, or a cuddly guest at a dinner party, but he certainly taught people what the word of God said, and people flocked to him in the wilderness to hear his blunt, urgent, practical message to them

The 2nd thing that we see about John is that he was 2) A preacher with a dramatic visual aid

John called people who accepted his call to repent to submit to **baptism….**

We often think of baptism as what happens to babies and young children at the start of their life, in a font in a Church building like this. Indeed, we’ve got 2 children being baptised this month.

My understanding of baptism in John’s day was increased by our pilgrimage to Israel in November. Here is an image [Image of Jordan River] not of John the Baptist by Robert Lovatt (!) next to the river Jordan.

John immersed people under the water and then raised them up, and this emphasises at least 2 things

First – the water of baptism dramatically symbolises Washing away the dirt of our sins.

~ Just as we need a bath or shower after exercise, to get rid of the grime and perspiration, so the water of baptism pictures both our sins, and God’s activity to cleanse us from those sins

Secondly, it is striking that **ALL** people need to have this particular ‘bath’ (A ‘bath’ necessary for all –

Jews as well as non- Jews….)

Before John’s ministry, baptism was seen as something that non Jews needed to submit to, so that their impurities could be dealt with and they could then join the Jewish community.

BUT that’s **not** how John operated. He called **all**- both Jews and non Jews -to be baptised.

Even though the Jews had received many religious privileges over the previous 1500 year, they STILL needed to cleansing, as they awaited the arrival of their Messiah.

‘ALL have turned away’, so ALL need to be washed clean from their sins - is John’s point…

* It’s what he said to the crowds then as they waited for their Messiah to arrive
* It’s what he’d want said today to ALL people of whatever background as we wait for Jesus’ return in glory. There’s no cause for pride. We all need to admit our sin and come to God begging for his cleansing…

There’s one last element to John’s preaching that we mustn’t miss. He was 3) A preacher who points to another

Some preachers today are rather full of themselves, always pointing to themselves, what their strengths are, and what they – and they alone- can do for people

John was certainly not like that!

He was very clear about the limitations of his ministry, and the supremacy of another’s ministry

Look eg at what he says in v16

‘I baptise 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 baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire’

It seems as though some of the crowds were speculating about John, wondering whether he might just be the long awaited Messiah, the one they’d been waiting now for over 400 years

‘*Oh no I’m not*!’ says John

‘***That*** *figure is to come, and He is SO much more superior to me that I’m not even competent to untie the straps of his sandals*!’

That particular duty was considered SO demeaning that a Jewish slave couldn’t be asked to do it for his Master. ‘*Well, he’s* ***SO*** *great’* , says John*, that I can’t even do that most humiliating of services for him*

When he comes, he will baptise people with the Holy Spirit and fire

The contrast that John wants to impress on our minds is something like this. He can make people ‘wet’ as a sign of sins being washed away. But only the Messiah can do that **deep work** in our hearts by his Holy Spirit, changing our nature so that we want to be holy, and have the power to start to be so!

*‘I’m the warm up act, not the real thing’* – John is saying!

*‘Wait for him, the Messiah- he’ll be here really soon’*

And so our reading finishes with the arrival of Jesus , the Messiah that John had been preparing people for.

Interestingly, he too is baptised (Image of Jesus being baptised by John) **NOT** because he has any sins of his own to be cleansed from, but as a sign that Jesus is identifying with sinful people, the sinful people he will soon die for - to cleanse from all their sin.

As he is baptised the heavens are opened, and the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus as a dove and a voice comes from Heaven indicating that Jesus really is God’s son (‘You are my son’)

 Luke records this in his gospel because he wants us to know for sure that

‘The one greater than John is here.

(We are to )Listen to him, Trust him (and)

Receive his baptism before it’s too late!’

So as we come to an end of our study on this man, John the Baptist, let’s ask ourselves 2 questions

* Have we repented and been baptised with the Holy Spirit yet?

~ You might think that this is a rather direct, almost impolite question, since you’ve been coming along to St Margaret’s for quite a while now, but I don’t apologise for asking you the question

~ One of my heroes is a man called John Chapman, an Australian preacher, a man who went round villages, towns, cities, university campuses explaining the good news about Jesus to great crowds . He’d always finish his talks with a call to people to turn from their sins, and turn to Jesus Christ in order to receive forgiveness of sins and inner transformation through the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and in almost every talk there were surprises as to who would pray this prayer. Very often people who’d been coming to church for decades realised they’d never prayed this sort of prayer before. Indeed on one occasion a bishop (image of a bishop) prayed this prayer. Might it be right for you today?

 Or here’s a 2nd question for you to ponder:-

* Are we following John’s model (as we speak to others about Jesus)?

Are we calling on others clearly about the need

* To Repent!
* To Receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit!
* And so to Be ready for Jesus’ return!

I’m not saying that we should do this with all people the first time we meet them. I was having supper with some people I barely knew earlier this week, and it would almost certainly have gone down like a lead balloon to call people to repentance and faith on first meeting…..

But we do need to pray that we follow John’s model of courageous, focussed witness to people, not because we want to win scalps, but because each person we talk to is a person Jesus made, loves, died for and longs to reach before that great and glorious day when Jesus returns, and divides all people into sheep and goats, some who will be with him for all eternity, and others who will be separated from for all eternity

Courageous witness can be **costly-** it cost John his liberty (v20) and will one day cost him his very life, but, at the end of the day, nothing will matter more than whether someone has turned from their sins and trusted in Christ.

[Prayer]

**Questions on Luke 3vv1-22**

**Getting started**

*Please picture a friend of yours – a good friend, but someone who does not share your Christian faith. Try to think how you would describe the Christian faith to him/ her.*

1. Have you had that conversation yet?
2. If yes, how did it go? If not, why hasn’t it seemed right yet?

**Into the text**

*Luke 1 and 2 have been full of the miraculous arrival of Jesus. We might expect Luke to turn now to the ministry of Jesus. But he doesn’t. Please read Luke 3vv1-22 to see what Luke describes first*

1. How does the quotation from Isaiah (40vv3-5) help us understand John the Baptist’s role? Why do you think that such a role was necessary?
2. What do the first recorded words of John (vv7-9) reveal about the urgency of his message?

How urgent and direct do you tend to be about this with friends?

1. What do John’s answers to the crowd, tax collectors and soldiers (10-14) teach us about what true repentance will lead to in their lives?

How might you explain what repentance in practice might mean for people today?

1. What does John want the people to understand about the ‘one to come’ (v15-18)?

How much does this challenge the way we tend to describe Jesus and his significance?

1. What does v19-20 reveal to us about the cost of courageous witness?

Does this act as a challenge to you?

1. What is Luke wanting us to understand through vv21-22?

How can this picture help us in understanding who Jesus is

**Applying it personally**

*Go back to the friend you imagined at the beginning….*

1. What does John encourage you to say to them about what true Christianity involves? See Mark 1v14/15 to see that this is full square behind Jesus and the first Christian sermon in Acts 2v38-39
2. Which elements of this message have you already shared with your friend? Which have you not yet shared?
3. What might be the next step for you in trying to point people to Jesus, as John did so courageously?

**Praying for one another**

*Most of us find it hard to be anything like as direct as John, even to those we really love.*

*Why not close by praying for one another*