

Luke 3: 1-6 with Zechariahs song Advent 2. 8th December 2024

Pre...pare ye the way of the Lord...Pre...pare ye the way of the Lord!

Prayer: Lord may your words stir in us this morning, that we may prepare your way, your coming to the world. Amen.

Last week I asked if you were ready...not just to celebrate Christmas, but ready for Christ's return.

This week our gospel reading comes from Luke 3 (pew bibles p 833), where we read of John the Baptist preaching in all the country, a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Luke tells us that John is the one who was written about by Isaiah the prophet...he is the one getting people ready for Christ's arrival...*a voice of one calling in the wilderness, "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him..."*

Like John the Baptist we too are called to proclaim the coming Christ, telling people about the reason we celebrate Christmas, Christ with us. And preparing the way for Christ's return. Being ready ourselves and inviting others to follow Jesus too, so that all will see God's salvation.

Let's look at this passage. Luke, the gospel writer is keen to place his writing in a historical context. At the beginning of his gospel he states that he is writing an orderly account of things that have been fulfilled, that were handed down from eyewitnesses.

Part of his orderly account includes placing events in history. When John the Baptist's birth was foretold in chapter 1, he says that it was in the time of Herod, King of Judea. In chapter 3 as he writes of John's preaching, he begins by giving us dates of when it happened. He writes of imperial, regional and religious authorities that were in power at that time. Placing John's ministry around 28 or 29 CE.

He also declares that at that time it was the *word of God* that came to John. He places him in the realm of the prophets of old. In fact John is seen as the last in a line of prophets from the Old Testament declaring the coming of Christ.

So, who is this John the Baptist? He is mentioned in all four gospels. But only the gospel of Luke has the story of John's birth. You can read about it in Luke chapter 1.

John was born of Elizabeth and Zechariah...in their old age and considered barren. He was in fact related to Jesus...Elizabeth was Mary's older cousin. But we have no indication that these men knew each other. Elizabeth lived in the hill country and Mary and Joseph had gone to Bethlehem for the birth and then escaped to Egypt for some time before returning to Nazareth.

It remains a mystery what kind of childhood John had before he went off into the desert...what did his parents tell him about his most auspicious conception and that of Mary? Elizabeth and Zechariah possibly died while he was still quite young.

But John seemed to know who Jesus was...even before he was born if you remember he leaped in his mother's womb when Mary came to visit. The Holy Spirit was upon him. And Zechariah had prophesied about his son...Luke 1: 67-80.

“and you my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him....to give knowledge of salvation...to shine on those living in darkness...to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

As the “word of God” came to John... *He traveled around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.* He preached God's words.

In John's gospel, we hear that John was quick to announce that he was not the Messiah. When pushed by his questioners he says he is ‘the voice’ of one crying in the wilderness...prepare the way of the Lord. He was getting people to be ready, to be repentant so that they would then follow Jesus, not him, when the time came. His life's purpose was to reveal who Jesus was and to testify to him, it was never about himself. He was a humble man, if somewhat strange – dressed in camel's hair and eating locusts and honey as described in Mark 1:6. And yet there was something about him as people flocked to hear him and be baptised.

John was the “herald” announcing Jesus's imminent arrival. We sang Hark the Herald this morning, a song about the Angels singing of the arrival of the newborn King Jesus. The angels were the heralds to the shepherds announcing Jesus' birth. John the Baptist was the herald to all people in all the country around the Jordan.

In those days if a King or important person was coming to visit a city, a ‘herald’ would be sent ahead to announce their coming. An Angel announced to the shepherds King Jesus' birth – telling the shepherds that he was a Saviour, the Messiah.

John the Baptist was the herald, announcing Jesus' arrival as he began his earthly ministry, about 30 years after his birth. Up until that time, his Kingship had been kept under wraps, aside from a couple of other prophets like Simeon and Anna who by God's Spirit recognized who Jesus was when he was presented at the temple as a baby. (Luke 2: 28-38)

When a herald announced that a King or notable person was coming to a city, then every effort would be made to clean up the city, pick up rubbish, make the paths smooth – fill in the potholes, remove the rocks. Great care and attention would be given to preparing for the regal visit.

This still happens today, there is a great fanfare if Royalty are visiting. Or when the Pope goes visiting...it sounds like a whole shanty town was bulldozed in Timor Leste recently when he went to visit there! I'm sure he would have preferred people to have housing...

John told people how they could get ready to meet Jesus. He preached *a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*. It was time to straighten out the crooked paths of their lives, turn from darkness, from worshipping idols, time to clean out the rubbish.

The crowds that came out to hear John were probably familiar with two kinds of baptism; there was one by which Gentile converts became Jews and so embarked on a whole new way of life; and then there was the Qumran community who conducted a type of baptism – ritual washings, a cleansing, as people turned from their sins and obeyed God. Both types called for changed behaviour.

John called for a baptism of repentance, that also called for a change of behaviour. The Greek word for repentance is metanoia. It doesn't just involve saying sorry and regretting what you have done, but rather a change of mind and heart. It is an inner transformation, a complete turning around from your old way of life.

Next week we will continue this passage where the crowds ask John what they should do and John spells out with examples the kind of life they should be living. So, tune in next week...

In the meantime, what do we take away from the passage we heard today?

Continuing in our advent theme of getting ready to celebrate Christ's birth and being ready for his second coming we need to look at our lives and ask ourselves how our transformation is going. Is there any area in our lives where we need to truly repent? It might be a struggle that we must continually turn away from and ask for God's forgiveness and help. A sinful action, a sinful thought. Pride and self-reliance, greed, anger, selfishness, impatience, self-righteousness, judging, gossiping...

Our first reading today was from Paul's letter to the Philippians, he was joyful and confident as he prayed for the church there. He was confident that *he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus*. (Phil 1)

Who began the good work in them? Not themselves...but Jesus. Jesus was the one who was at work in them as they were baptised in his name by the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is the one, through his Holy Spirit who is at work in us, he is the one that will continue to work in us...if we let him!

It won't just happen all by itself. We must stay close to Jesus, repenting regularly and seeking to follow his path and no other. Our prayer should be like Paul's prayer for the Philippians...

Perhaps you can pray this out loud with me, changing the word 'your' for 'our'...

We pray that *our love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that we may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God.* (Phil's 1:9-11)

May our lives bring glory to Christ in all that we do. And may we proclaim him. We may not all be prophets like John the Baptist, but we can announce the coming of Jesus, we can invite our friends and family to come to know him. To receive his grace and his peace. As I said last week, Christmas gives us a good opportunity to talk about Jesus and to invite someone to church or to dinner or to a carol service.

This week our advent candle is for peace. Zechariah's song spoke of the Lord guiding our feet into the path of **peace**. The Angels sang to the shepherds; *Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth **peace** to those on whom his favour rests.*

The world needs peace, people need peace in their hearts. We know the Prince of Peace, let's share the message of his peace with those who so need it.

And let's prepare the way of the Lord.

Let's pray: Father, we thank you for the message of John the Baptist who you sent ahead of Jesus to prepare people's hearts to meet him. May we examine our own hearts as we prepare to meet Jesus when he comes again. Lord, please continue your transforming work in us through the power of your Spirit. And use us to proclaim your message of salvation and peace to the world.

In the name of your son Jesus Christ. Amen.

Pre...pare ye the way of the Lord, Pre...pare ye the way of the Lord!