

## John the Baptist as Preacher

After the church service a little boy told the vicar, "when I grow up I'm going to give you some money." "Well, that is kind of you, thank you," replied the vicar, "but why?" "Because my daddy says that you're the poorest preacher that we have ever had!"

The story of Mark Twain's attendance at a church service for a charity in New York always amuses me. Before the sermon he placed a \$20 bill on the pew ledge. After ten minutes had elapsed he replaced it with a \$10 bill. After twenty minutes he removed the \$10 bill. The preacher apparently droned on for a long time. Finally when the collection plate came round Mark Twain TOOK OUT a \$20 bill. An interesting reflection of his thoughts of that preacher's sermon!

Recently I have been involved into many aspects of preaching and so even if I cannot put it into practice, I do know, now in theory at least, what an effective or even an outstanding sermon is all about. It needs to be well-prepared, authentic, relevant, coherent and well-structured, with careful attention to tone, body language and expression. An effective beginning is essential – sharp, able to arouse interest immediately and engage the listeners before they switch off. Build a rapport quickly and be audience sensitive. PPPP - Planning, preparation, practice and perspiration!

Then, in our gospel today, we meet John the Baptist as preacher. He opens: *You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.*

What happened to good practice, then? John's introductory words were a great way to win friends and influence people. What happened to the positive rapport with his audience, the effort to engage in the first minutes of his message? Where is attention to structure, to planning, careful change of tones and use of positive body language? Modern day authors on preaching claim these are essential for effective preaching.

John wasn't told! He hadn't done his background reading. He hadn't listened or been to class. He gets straight to the point, a point enough to put anyone off who bothered to turn up to hear it. But people did turn up. To them he must have appeared strange. Many in the crowd believed it was Elijah. They didn't like what John was saying and they didn't warm to him. But John was saying, as Elijah had said, that God's day was fast approaching when he would judge his people. The only way to escape was to repent, NOW, confessing sins and being cleansed through baptism. There was urgency in his message. People flocked to the riverbank to hear him rant these warnings and a message of expectation, of hope and deliverance for those prepared to change. God is coming now. Be ready!

Billy Graham has often told the story of the time when he arrived in a small town to preach and wanted to post a letter. He asked a small boy where the post office was. When the boy told him, Graham thanked him and said, "if you come to church this evening you can hear me telling everyone the way to get to heaven." "I don't think so," the boy said, "You don't even know your way to the post office!" John knew he was preparing a way for Jesus. But he felt frustrated as no-one seemed ready. Why were people not taking his urgency seriously? His message is littered, uncompromisingly, with warnings about missed opportunities. Even worse: "*the axe is already taking aim*", John shouts, "*at the root of the tree.*" "*Every tree that doesn't produce good fruit is to be cut*

*down and thrown into the fire.*" Being plunged into the waters of the Jordan was a start, but an outward sign of something that needs to be heartfelt.

His message was not designed to put people at their ease or get people to like him. If it was it was a strange way of going about it. The sculptor, Auguste Rodin, captures John's preaching wonderfully. His sculpture entitled "John the Baptist preaching" in the Victoria and Albert Museum, is of a near naked John with long unruly hair and a tiny animal skin around his waist. He is in mid-stride with a finger raised, his head turned to one side and lips parted as if in mid sentence- John in full flow! However strange John seemed to people, his appearance was foretold by Malachi 450 years earlier and he was alive with passion for preaching the Word of God. People flocked to hear him; many were baptised by him as he prepared the way for Jesus.

John was totally unlike even the other preachers of the New Testament: Peter, Paul, Timothy. For John there was no structure to or time to prepare his message. He gets straight to the point! Divine judgement is imminent. Nobody should be wasting a minute! John was preaching about repentance. People often confuse sorrow or contrition with repentance, being sorry for wrong they have done, being contrite about how it may have affected others. But repentance runs deeper. Repentance is fundamentally a change in thought and behaviour and this is fiery John's message. And if this isn't enough, John warned people about false hopes. Jews believed that God would save them because they were descendants of Abraham. They reasoned that, what Paul called in Romans, 'the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, the promises and the patriarchs' belonged to them (Romans 9: 4-5). They were safe.

John warned that they were not safe. A saving faith is personally exercised not a God-given right. No person would be saved just because their ancestors or family were believers. Every person must believe and repent to receive the gifts of eternal life. If we think that God will save us because of our heritage, the regularity or quality of our worship or our Christian service, our hope is as misplaced as John's hearers! I am reminded of one of Milton Jones' *10 Second Sermons*: 'If becoming a Christian is *just* about changing your culture and your language, I may as well become a Norwegian.'<sup>1</sup> God saves sinners by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus alone. And along with faith comes repentance, a true transformation of thought and behaviour.

John's preaching spells out what he means here - compassion, honesty, contentment. In Luke's Gospel we read that he answers the crowd's questions one by one. Urging people to act NOW he tells his listeners that to hold onto notions about our faith from earlier days, even childhood days will not carry us through. It was C S Lewis who said that you understand sleep when you are awake and not while you are sleeping and you understand the nature of being drunk when you are sober. So it is only when our faith becomes alive both to ourselves and to others that we realise the emptiness of living without a living faith and, in John's message, the stark consequences of half hearted or no repentance and transformation.

Charles Dickens, in his novel *Bleak House*, has a character called Jo, the Crossing Sweeper, whom he describes shuffling through the streets of the City unable to read the mysterious symbols over the shops and puzzling over the people who can read and who go to church on Sundays. He wonders what their religion means to them and how come it means nothing to him. "To be jostled and hustled and moved on" Jo thinks, "and really

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<sup>1</sup> Milton Jones p 16

to feel I have no business here or there or anywhere, yet I am here." Jo makes his way to Blackfriars and sits down on a doorstep to eat his breakfast. By chance he looks up and sees the dome of St Paul's Cathedral and to the cross on the top. "From the boy's face", Dickens writes, "one might suppose that sacred emblem to be, in his eyes, the crowning confusion of the great confused city, so golden, so high up and so far out of reach."

I am reminded of another of Milton Jones' *10 Second Sermons*: 'Too often I am like a pigeon living in a railway station – oblivious of all those around making vital decisions about where to go and how to get there.'<sup>2</sup> Poor confused Jo! What use was St Paul's to Jo? What use worship? What use worshippers' faith? Worshippers bustling around, in and out, being busy, making decisions! What DID all their worship mean to them? What did that cross on top of the dome mean to them, to Jo? With everything going on around him would someone explain to him? Would someone do something to point to a living faith?

There is a true story about another of Mark Twain's attendances at a Sunday service. He met the pastor at the door afterwards and told him that he had a book at home with every word he had preached that morning. The minister assured him that the sermon was an original. Twain still held his position and agreed to send the book over to the pastor in the morning. When the preacher unwrapped it he found a dictionary and on the flyleaf Mark Twain had written: Words, just words, just words! In our gospel we have been introduced to one fiery, passionate preacher, on an urgent mission, with a blunt message. Re-reading his words is a good opportunity for us to contemplate the life in our faith, our own repentance and transformation, our life with Jesus **and** our preparation to meet with him one day.

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<sup>2</sup> Milton Jones p 48

Milton Jones (2013) *Even More Concise 10 Second Sermons* Darton, Longman and Todd London