

John prepares the way

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!”

Well, whatever the people, at Jordan’s riverbank, thought of John’s preaching no one could have avoided this eccentric character or the message that he ferociously delivered. Imagine a canvas painting of the scene at Jesus’ baptism. It would be very crowded with a mixed bag of people there. But why were they there? John the Baptist, up to his waist in shallow water of the River Jordan seems to hold the key. He seemed a very gaunt figure with fiery eyes, using those accusing fingers when he was trying to get his point across and that rough tunic of camel hair with his leather belt. The crowd didn’t warm to John and they didn’t like what he was telling them. John was saying, as Elijah had said so long before, that God’s day was fast approaching when he would judge his people and the only way to escape was to repent, NOW, confessing sins and being cleansed through baptism.

John stands as a formidable figure in the forefront of the canvas. He has an urgency about his message – ‘repent for the kingdom of God is at hand’ – change your ways, wipe away past wrongs through baptism, change what you think, be a new person, live by new principles and priorities and do it all NOW. As Isaiah foretold: “A voice of one calling in the wilderness: ‘prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’” You can see why this message was so unpopular. So why is the canvas at the Jordan River, so crowded? Why did everyone flock to hear this strange looking man rant and rave? The answer lies in John’s message of expectation and deliverance for those who are prepared to change, a message told by Isaiah centuries before – a message of hope and forgiveness. In Isaiah we read: ‘See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart.’ God is coming; be ready. This message that drew the crowds.

John shows frustration as he senses no one was ready, no one seemed to be taking his message seriously. Yet John’s uncompromising message was loud and clear. John’s purpose in life was to prepare the way for someone else. Someone more powerful, someone greater, someone whose sandals he is unworthy to untie, someone who will not baptise with water but with the Holy Spirit, someone who will be carrying a winnowing fork in his hand to clear the threshing floor and will gather the wheat into his barn while he burns the chaff with unquenchable fire. Wow! It is there in Luke’s Gospel, Chapter 3 with a passing reference in Mark’s Gospel. John shouts: “Prepare yourselves!”

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!”

In our canvas of the Jordan scene, John was there to show the way but not to the local post office, but something much more profound – none other than to eternal life. John was all the directions rolled into one very strange looking person preaching a somewhat frightening message. And what happens? Jesus asks John, if he would baptise him!!

“What am I supposed to do with this?” grumbled a motorist as the policeman handed him a speeding ticket. “Keep it,” said the policeman, “When you collect four of them you get a bicycle.” What an excellent example of potential downshifting or downsizing (as it is called these days!). I think it’s called ‘enforced simplicity’ too! And that I think is exactly what John thought about Jesus’ request to be baptised. And by him!

In his commentary of this passage, Bishop Tom Wright tries to give his readers a flavour of the scene by asking us to imagine we are in a packed concert hall waiting for the thunderous music to begin. We know how it is going to sound - wonderful music, explosive and exciting. The introducer comes on and builds up the frenzy, saying how the great musician has arrived. He gets us all on our feet, to welcome him with an ovation, the person who is going to fulfil our expectations. And as we wait a small figure comes on stage, not carrying a conductor’s baton to bring the orchestra to life but a small flute. That’s downshifting or simplicity on a big scale!

It was Jesus, who, according to John, was going to sweep into the concert hall in a blaze of glory, light, colour and thunderous explosions transforming everything and everyone in sight. But he didn’t. John was shocked. How could he be the person who will set God’s world alight with the fire of the Holy Spirit? In meeting Jesus at his baptism, John must have thought his mission to be unravelling before his eyes. He was preparing the people, in expectancy of a great leader who is coming to bring God’s fire to burn the roots of evil and corruption, of self-centred living and hypocrisy, of unfruitfulness. And Jesus comes up to John and says: baptise me! How do you think John felt?

But far from confusing the issue and unravelling John’s mission in life, he is confirming every word of it. Jesus is the player with the small flute, according to Tom Wright, and he plays so gently and softly, a tune different to what we imagined. But as we listen, Wright claims, we hear familiar music played in a new way. This new music is soft, piercing our imagination and our hopes - transforming them. And right at the end the full orchestra responds with a fantastic new version of the music we had been expecting all along. Jesus is coming to fulfil God’s promises to mankind. God’s wind is going to blow like never before. God’s rescue of us who are repentant is ensured. Jesus joined his people – all of them - the poor, the ill, the sad, the physically disabled, the rebellious, the rich, the smelly, the pompous, the young children, the old who can hardly walk – to be baptised. This is the good news of the Gospel this morning. God is with us in the midst of our broken world. History was being made in our canvas along the banks of the Jordan that day. I am not sure that John realised that - probably not. But as Isaiah foretold, Jesus was the person on which God would rest his Holy Spirit – sent into a world of fear, heartbreak and misunderstanding, – our world we all so often experience – to save it. John was there to prepare the way. We have an advantage over John. We know that Jesus will one day reveal his kingdom in all its glory, bringing justice, peace, joy and God’s love to

everyone. We have work to do if we are to play a full part in the orchestra to which Tom Wright referred, an orchestra now led by this wonderful musician playing the flute.

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. Every person needs to experience faith and repent to receive the gifts of eternal life. John is saying to us that if we think the way to Jesus is through our Christian heritage or culture, our worship or attendance in church, or our Christian service, our hope is as misplaced as the hope of John's listeners along Jordan's riverbank was at the time! It is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus alone that we can find our way to eternal life.

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