

Radical lifestyle

Luke 3.7-18

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Last week we have looked at the life of John the Baptist for finding clues about how to prepare for the coming of the Lord.

We saw the importance of prayer and digesting the Word of God, and the urgency to create time and space for listening to God through his word: quiet time and space.

We also saw that a permanent state of repentance is important. We must turn our life over to God again and again.

Today in the reading of the Gospel of Luke we saw that the church of John the Baptist was filling up. People came in big numbers. But the sermons of John were not your classical “How to Grow your Church” message.

People came to John in an advent mood - they had high expectations. It was a happy time of expecting a new work of God in this world.

Just as we focus these weeks on how to prepare for meeting with God.

The coming of the Messiah; that was the expectation of John and of us, and it is good news! Good news? If you listen to John, it did not sound that good at all!

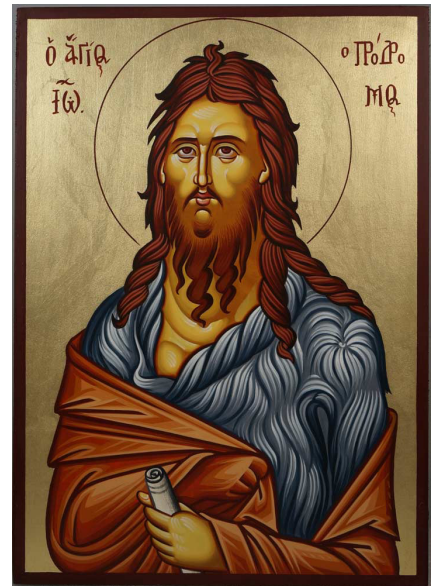
Masses came and what does John do?

1. Change demanded

John calls the people a brood of vipers. That’s not nice! And instead of being a welcoming, “seeker-friendly” church, he begins by questioning their motives.

Repentance, John says, is not only a change of worldview - that is the primary meaning of repentance - but a change of lifestyle is needed as well! John exemplified that change.

How he dressed was not in line with the fashion of his days. His food was not from the Michelin Star restaurants; he withdrew from the evil empire of power games and using other people for your own ends.



“Do not accept the status quo of this world” was his message, “and live differently.” He preached it and he lived that message. And when I preach it, I also preach at myself. I must also live it.

John lashed out at them - obviously with some insight in the workings of the human heart.

“We are Jews,” the people who came for baptism thought, “We are fine with God. Did God not make great promises to Abraham? Are we not his children? God cannot do without us! We are irreplaceable!”

So why did they come to the church of John? For a beautiful holy moment? For a blessing? For encouragement?



John makes two things clear: our religious background makes no difference to God. Lutherans, Catholics, Baptists, Anglicans? So what! It's not enough and it is not that important.

God can make children of Abraham even from these stones, is what John told those Jewish people that came for baptism. Maybe John pointed to the stones on the waterside.

Yes, God made fantastic promises to the posterity of Abraham but... if those sons of Abraham do not obey God, they have no future. And God can make others, even those Gentile stones, into children of Abraham. Paul in his letters to the Galatians and the Romans says much about this, 25 years later.

The Jews at that time believed that God had a favoured nation clause... He would judge all nations by one standard and Israel by another.

John made clear that there is no racial privilege with God. And we may add, no denominational privilege either. That is one important thing John made clear.

Lineage does not help us. How our parents raised us up does not bring us to God. Surely it is good to grow up in a fine family and a good church, but then what? God has children, but no grandchildren.

The right theology (the change of worldview) and the right rituals (baptism) are irrelevant for God if they are not accompanied with a renewed lifestyle.

And that is the second thing John underlines. The only way to please God is a changed worldview combined with a change of life that flows out of this worldview.

The right theology is utterly important and rituals are very important. But if they are not accompanied by a life that glorifies God, John not so kindly but very clearly says, we are as useless as dry wood that is only good to be burned.

Not nice, John!

2. Three groups of people

But there were many people who responded well. Three groups of people come to John and they all ask the right question: “What must we do?” What we do, that is what the Christian life is about.

That does not disqualify the importance of faith and religious actions like baptism and Holy Communion, but the point of our faith and our religious life is what we do in our daily life.

Group 1: These were people in general. When they asked, "What must we do?" John told them, “If you have two tunics give one away. If you have two loaves of bread give one to the hungry.”

Some Christians talk much about tithing, giving 10% of your income to church. John speaks actually of giving away 50%. We should not see this as law to be taken literally. The issue is: if someone is in need, help that person with what he or she needs. The capstone of the Christian life is: love for others made practical.

The fact that we must not take this 50%-rule of John as law is no escape route for us. It is still that radical challenge. When you see someone with a real need and you can do something to help, God says: help.

Compare John 3:16, “for God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son”... with 1 John 3:16: “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.”

How God gave his son is our example. In that same way we are to show love for others: by a sacrificial lifestyle.

Group 2: These were the tax collectors... These were really crooks. The Roman Empire knew a system of what we called tax farming. You could bid for the right to collect tax in a certain area, and you would then pay a lump sum to the government. So unlike in our days, tax collecting was not done by government, but by private businesses.

And then your business began to collect tax - and all that you collected went straight into your own pocket. This was easy for government - it delegated the headache of taxation to commercial guys, and government got a fixed amount. But it was a great headache for the people who were effectively robbed.

Stop extortion, John says to those people. Your business should not be



used for your own gain but to serve the people, that is the will of God. If you have any position in life, use it for the good of all!

Group 3: Then some soldiers came. John has a similar message for them. Do not use your power to make the life of people hard, but serve them. These soldiers were, by the way, more like the policemen in our days.

An interesting thought: tax officers and soldiers worked for the oppressive Roman Empire that occupied Israel. These were mostly Jewish people who collaborated with the foreign oppressors.

John was not a revolutionary who said: you cannot serve a bad government. His message is, whatever circumstances you are in, always use your work for the benefit of the people.

3. Sanctification of daily life

How you do your work is not less important than worship in church; how you do your work and how you serve people should reflect our worship of God in church.

Or rather, God wants us to worship him all the time, and our worship in church sets the tone for how we live the rest of our life. During Holy Communion we unite with Jesus Christ who sacrificed himself to God and for the people. After that, we go into the world to love and serve the Lord. In the world.

Our liturgy of Holy Eucharist and the words of John the Baptist, they sanctify our daily life. All things are important for God. How we cook, how we paint, how we preach, how we shop, how we do our financial accounts, how we teach, how we speak with the people in our street, how we live our daily lives.

The question is not so much what sort of job we have; the issue is, how we do those jobs for God. How we do all our work for the benefit of others. If we do this well, God is glorified in our lives.



The people coming to John were impressed with his lifestyle and with his powerful sermons, and they wondered, is this the expected savior, the Messiah? No, John says, he will be much mightier than I am.

And again, John doesn't use sweet words when speaking of the redeemer, Jesus Christ. He speaks of a baptism in the Holy Spirit and with fire. Now our Pentecostal brethren can get all excited about this verse, but be careful.

Yes indeed, there is reason for excitement. John says that the coming messiah will baptize us in the Holy Spirit. This is a clear reference to many promises in the Old Testament where we see that God will one day pour out his spirit on his people. Jesus is the one who will give spiritual renewal to his people.

Well, that is just what we need!

But this spiritual renewal is not without fire. This baptism in spirit and fire has an aspect of judgment. It is impossible for the Holy Spirit to work in our life without him also burning away what is wrong and what needs change.

So John does not promise a sweet Jesus.

Verse 18 says "with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them."

Good news? He was calling people a brood of vipers, he warned them of judgement, and he told those who follow the Messiah that even they will experience something of the judgment of God....

Conclusion

If you go with pain in your stomach to a doctor, and he tells you that something is really wrong, but that an operation will solve the problem, you could say, "Well, bad news." On the other hand, the doctor has shown a way out. It is good news that he found out what the problem is and that he can solve it.

The Christian faith points to our problem and it shows the way out. Quite realistically, our faith says that there is something wrong with our nature and with our behavior.

The world would be a perfect place if we humans were perfect, but we are not.

But we are not; change is need. That's why John, as a trustworthy doctor, tells us to repent and to live that way, by serving each other.

And we will never be perfect, so the change of heart and lifestyle is an ongoing process. A process that leads us ever closer to God.

If God did not care about us, he would abandon us without notice. But he loves us enough to hurt us with the truth, so that we have hope, if we change our lifestyle.

The word of God can be painful as surgery, but it puts us on the road of recovery. If only we do it.

+ Amen