

John the Baptist: Herald (Luke 3:1-6)

I'd like to start out tonight by asking you a question: what is it that you trust in? What do you put your hope in?

If you look round our culture today, people put their trust in all sorts of things. Think of someone like Richard Dawkins, who claims to put all his trust in science and scientific knowledge. That's a very common one today. Or perhaps you put your trust in medicine, or in logic and reason, or in money, or in any one of a hundred other things. Some people trust in their own status.

With all these voices going round in society today, it's small wonder that people are confused by who or what to put their trust in. Ultimately, with all these voices going round, we have to trust in ourselves... don't we?

Well, let's see what God has to say to us tonight. We're going to be looking at Luke 3:1-6, and we're continuing our series on John the Baptist.

We start out by **reading vv1-2**.

Those are a lot of names, aren't they? Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, and Annas and Caiaphas - it's like a *who's who* of first-century Roman and Jewish rulers! Luke starts out with the big cheese, with the emperor, and then works his way down the regional rulers and finishes with the most local rulers with the least authority - the high priests. That's an awful lot of detail!

Why do you think that Luke went to all the trouble of including it? I mean, who was Philip the tetrarch of Iturea and Tracónitis, and why does it matter? Aren't these details just a bit boring and a distraction from what's actually going on?

The answer is, and Guy touched on this last week, is that Luke really wants us to know that *this actually happened in history*. There was an actual place and a time, a date, when the events he records happened on earth. He wants us to have confidence as we read through the gospel to say, "I know this really happened. Someone didn't just make it up". This isn't just something exclusive to Luke - think back to the way the prophets of the Old Testament were introduced: Isaiah 6:1 "In the year that King Uzziah died". Or Jeremiah 1:2: "The Word of the Lord came to him in the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah".

This really matters, especially when you compare it to a religion such as Islam. A few years ago, Tom Holland wrote a book called "In the Shadow of the Sword" about the origins of Islam. Although I found the book itself quite heavy going at times, it was an eye-opening read. Historians can actually say very little about the origins of Islam - there is virtually no written evidence of any kind before about 100 years after the death of Mohammed. The Quran itself hardly makes any references to places or dates at all. In other words, we know very little about the life of Mohammed from a historical perspective - we can't even be sure that he really existed!

In complete contrast to that, here Luke tells us *this* is the time of John the Baptist and Jesus' ministry: it happened in a particular time and place. The gospels are not just spiritual, as some people claim, they are historical. The events described in the gospels only have spiritual significance

because they happened in history - the one presupposes the other. We started out by thinking about what we put our trust in - the first thing we can do is to put our trust in Luke, the historian, and the events he records.

But there is another reason for Luke to include this historical detail: by including the Roman emperor and governors, Luke is saying that it has *universal* significance. The Roman emperor was the most powerful person on the planet of his day. And yet, John and Jesus' message was for him as well. John the Baptist's message is not something which happened in an isolated, out of the way kind of place - it happened on the world stage and it has universal implications. We'll come back to that idea in a minute.

Let's move on. The second part of **verse 2** says, "The word of God came to John son of Zechariah". Just a few moments ago we thought about the call of Jeremiah: once again this is another similarity. Luke is telling us that God is raising up a prophet, like the prophets he raised up of old. It was about 400 years by the time of John the Baptist since the last prophet had been raised up. Can you imagine the excitement and expectation of people who heard John? 400 years of silence, but now God is speaking again.

And because God is speaking, it means the promises he made to the Israelites through the prophets long ago, the promises which he made to Abraham and Moses, here they are - about to be fulfilled. And Luke reinforces that when he says, end of **verse 2**, "in the wilderness". He draws attention to the fact that John the Baptist is the one whom Isaiah was prophesying about in Isaiah 40, in the passage he quotes in a second. John the Baptist is part of the fulfilment of God's plans and promises, he is part of the plan of God as it unfolds.

So in **verse 3** we read that John "went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." No-one really knows why John the Baptist actually baptised people: although baptism has been a common practice since the early days of the Christian church, I don't think it was really done amongst first century Jewish believers. It probably had something to do with purification and cleansing - preparing yourself for the coming of the LORD. We'll come back to that theme in a moment as well.

John's message, his preaching, was simple: repentance for the forgiveness of sins. I wonder, if I went round the room here and asked everyone what the gospel was, what you would say? How would you summarise the gospel, if you only had a few words? This is the way that Luke summarises the gospel: "repentance for the forgiveness of sins". If you just flip over to the end of Luke, chapter 24:46-47, this is what Jesus says:

"This is what is written: the Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and **repentance for the forgiveness of sins** will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem."

So, according to Luke, this is also the way that *Jesus* summarises the gospel. The gospel, according to both John here and Jesus in Luke 24, is repenting from our sins - turning away from the things in our lives which separate us from God, and turning to God - where we will receive forgiveness of sins.

Now, it goes without saying that John the Baptist was preaching *before* Jesus began his ministry - what John preached was to prepare the way for Jesus. John was simply pointing to the forgiveness

which was available in Christ. But the message that John preached is the same message that we need to hear today: turn away from your sins and trust in the one who will forgive sins. Put your trust in the one who forgives. We started out thinking about trust, and we have that theme again. Trust in Luke, as an accurate historian, and trust in the one who forgives sins.

So that's how Luke summarises John the Baptist's ministry. But then he goes on, and we have in **vv4-6** an extended quotation from Isaiah 40.

Notice there, the voice of one calling "in the wilderness" - we've already mentioned that. Just to make crystal clear that John the Baptist is the one who is fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah. But what is he doing?

"Prepare the way for the LORD, make straight paths for him." The image here, of making straight paths, is that of preparing the way for Royalty. Has anyone here been to see the Queen? ... A few years ago, the Queen came to Ipswich and my parents went down to see her. Unfortunately they didn't manage to get very close - there were lots of people there, and there were also barriers put up, and lots of police around, etc. The point is, it took a lot of preparation for the Queen to visit. How much greater, then, should it be for the Lord of heaven and earth? If God himself was coming to down, what would you do to prepare? More to the point - what *should* you do to prepare?

And with this in mind the quotation goes on: **verse 5**. We've moved here from preparing God's way to what God will do. In fact, if you were a first-century Jew listening at this point, you would surely be thinking of the Day of the Lord - something which was going to happen in the end-times, when they believed God would finally vindicate his own people and judge the rest. But in the 'geographic' imagery here there is an element of judgement. For example, that phrase "every mountain and hill made low": if you read through Isaiah 2, you'll notice that same phrase used several times in the context of God humbling the proud. For example, v12:

The eyes of the arrogant will be humbled
and human pride brought low;
the Lord alone will be exalted in that day.

In fact, the whole of Isaiah really talks about trusting in God and not in idols - trusting in God alone rather than anything created by man. Have a read of the rest of Isaiah 40, for example.

And the reason is, there will come a day of judgement. There will come a day when God will judge the earth in righteousness. All people will stand before him. On that day, what will you trust in to save you? This is why Luke quotes this passage here, at the beginning of John the Baptist's ministry. John's message was that it is pointless to trust in anything other than salvation from the LORD. God will bring down the proud, those who trust in themselves - but he will save those who humble themselves, who trust in him for their salvation.

You see that the valleys will be 'filled in' - those who humble themselves will be lifted up. God will raise up those who humble themselves and trust in him, but God will make low those who trust in themselves. At the time of the Reformation, the reformers did - and we should still - emphasise justification by faith alone. It is only trusting in the Lord Jesus for his forgiveness of sins which will make us right before God. We can bring nothing to God which contributes to our own salvation, except the sins which we are delivered from.

Given all of this, why would anyone trust in anyone other than the LORD for their salvation? No-one can stand before the judgement seat of God and be guiltless in his eyes. Every single one of us needs to trust in God alone for his salvation.

And so this is why Luke finishes the quotation as he does in **verse 6**: "All people will see God's salvation". You remember back at the start of this passage that Luke includes a reference to all those rulers - well here again he picks up that theme. **All** people will see God's salvation. Jesus' life didn't happen hidden in some private place: it was lived in the full glare of the public eye. All people saw his life, they all - in a sense - 'saw' God's salvation. Not all people accepted it.

And yet, we know that because of God's coming judgement, because of the coming day of the Lord, all people need to accept God's salvation. All people need to put their trust in him. Tiberius Caesar needed to trust in him. Pontius Pilate needed to trust in him. David Cameron needs to trust in him. You and I, and everyone living in Great Clacton, needs to trust in him.

As Paul said to the Athenians in Acts 17:

...since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone – an image made by human design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.

All of this is a challenge to us. Firstly, we are challenged as to who *we* put our trust in. Do we repent of our sins and trust in the Lord Jesus alone for forgiveness of our sins? But secondly, think about all those people you know. Think of your friends, your neighbours, your work colleagues. Every single person you know, every single person who has ever lived, needs ultimately to stand before the judgement seat of Christ. And the challenge is, we need to pray to God to be giving us opportunities to share the gospel, opportunities to spread the good news of his kingdom. Because "he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed".

In a sense, John the Baptist is a role model for us. John the Baptist didn't point to himself, but simply pointed people to the salvation offered in the Lord Jesus. This is our task. This is the task of the church. And as I begin my time here in Great Clacton, I think it's a great reminder to me and to us that the task of evangelism is never finished. The church cannot afford to forget what it is here for - to reach out to the lost. Because God has set a day when he will judge the earth, and it is *only* through the salvation offered in the Lord Jesus that we can stand.

So, I'd like to finish with this challenge: if you don't already, why don't you pick two people who you know who aren't Christian, and pray for them every day? Ask God to give you opportunities to share the gospel with them in a natural way. Ask God to give you an opportunity to invite them to the Alpha course in September. Ask God to open their eyes to his Word, because we know that ultimately Salvation is the Lord's work.

And so as we finish, let me just ask you that question from the start again: who do you trust in? And who do your friends trust in?

Let's pray together.