

Mt. 3:1-12*Tim Anderson 1/1/2023*

A bit like the Magi who we've been looking at for the last few weeks, John the Baptist makes a bit of a cameo appearance in the gospels. And for that reason we don't often spend much time thinking of him. And when we do think about him, I fear he gets quickly dismissed. This is how I expect our minds work. "John the Baptist was a warm up act for Jesus. He came to prepare the way for the Lord. So basically as soon as the Lord arrived, John was obsolete and we don't have to worry about him too much. And this is comforting because quite frankly his message is a bit gung ho for my tastes anyway."

But John was actually a bigger deal at the time than you might think by reading the gospels. We meet people in the book of Acts who decades later were worshipping God according to the teachings of John. In Acts 19 Paul was travelling and arrived in Ephesus. He met some worshippers of God who had received John's baptism. They hadn't even heard of Jesus. So Paul told them about Jesus, and they were baptised as followers of Jesus and received the Holy Spirit. It's quite a remarkable thing if you think about it. Ephesus is up in modern day Turkey quite a long way from the Judean desert where John did his ministry. And the events of Acts 19 are more than two decades after John was executed by Herod. And there were still people who Paul could bump into worshipping God according to the teachings of John the Baptist.

And when the historian Josephus
 came to write down an account of that period of time,
 (his 'Antiquities of the Jews' was written in about 94 AD),
 John the Baptist actually gets more space than Jesus.
 And there is in fact a small religious group in Iraq and Iran even today
 Called the Mandaeans,
 Who are worshippers of John the Baptist.
 So he must have been a significant figure
 to have people worshipping him 2000 years later.
 Though no doubt he would be horrified at the practice.
 The prophet who said,
 "After me is one more powerful than I,
 Whose sandals I am not fit to carry,"
 Would not exactly want people to be worshipping him.

My point is,
 John was a significant figure and we shouldn't skim over him.

So we don't skim over him.
 Also we don't drive a wedge between John and Jesus.
 Maybe it's my history of acting in a musical in 1995,
 where I played the part of John the Baptist,
 complete with a hessian sack for a costume and a bushy ginger beard
 to make me look like I'd been living in the desert
 without the comforts of the razors
 which clearly were readily available
 in the supermarkets of down town first century Jerusalem,
 that those who played the other characters used.
 Maybe it's my history,
 But I've always thought of John
 as a bit of a hellfire and brimstone preacher
 who was a sharp contrast to the gentle healer who spoke softly.
 But it's interesting how much of John's words
 find an echo in the teaching of Jesus.
 The passage that we read today is the only account of John's teaching

other than the parallel passage in Luke which is almost word for word the same. So I'm going to go through and point out the similarities between John's teaching and Jesus' teaching to you.

First of all there's Matthew's summary of John's message.

3:1 "In those days John the Baptist came,

Preaching in the desert of Judea and saying,

'Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'"

And in chapter 4:17, we have Matthew's summary of Jesus' message.

"From that time on, Jesus began to preach,

"Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

It's word for word the same.

Secondly, there's John's address to the Pharisees and Sadducees –

"You brood of vipers!

Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?"

And in chapter 23:33,

we have Jesus' address to the Pharisees and teachers of the law.

"You snakes! You brood of vipers!

How will you escape from being condemned to hell?"

It's not word for word the same,

But it's so close it might as well be.

And a little aside here.

As a 21C reader, it would be natural to interpret 'vipers'

as a metaphor for dangerous and nasty.

That's possible but the most likely way to read it is different.

In 1C Israel, they would burn the stubble of the last harvest

as a way of preparing the fields for the next crop.

When they set the fields alight,

the snakes would all come slithering out of the field to avoid the fire.

Looked at that way,

a viper is someone who richly deserves to get burned

but is trying to slither away from judgement.

That's how John the Baptist was viewing the Pharisees and Sadducees who came to him to be baptised.

OK back to the parallels between John and Jesus.

Thirdly there's the call for repentance.

John says,

3:8 "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance."

In chapter 11:21 Jesus says,

"Woe to you Korazin! Woe to you Bethsaida!

If the miracles that were performed in you

had been performed in Tyre and Sidon,

they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes."

Fourthly there's the material about the Jews being children of Abraham.

John says,

3:9 "Do not think you can say to yourselves,

'We have Abraham as our father.'

I tell you that out of these stones

God can raise up children for Abraham."

And in chapter 8:11-12, Jesus says,

"I say to you that many will come from the East and West,

And will take their places at the feast

with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.

But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside,

into the darkness,

where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Fifthly, there is material about bearing good fruit

being an appropriate response for subjects of the kingdom of heaven.

John says,

3:10 "The axe is already at the root of the trees,

And every tree that does not produce good fruit

will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

Towards the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says,

7:17-18 "Likewise every good tree bears good fruit,

But a bad tree bears bad fruit.
 A good tree cannot bear bad fruit,
 And a bad tree cannot bear good fruit.
 Every tree that does not bear good fruit
 is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

One more for good measure.
 Regarding the separation of the righteous from the unrighteous.
 Talking about Jesus, John says,
 3:12 “His winnowing fork is in his hand,
 And he will clear his threshing floor,
 Gathering the wheat into the barn
 And burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”
 In chapter 13:30 Jesus says,
 “Let both wheat and weeds grow together until the harvest.
 At that time I will tell the harvesters:
 First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned;
 Then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.”
 The imagery is slightly different.
 Jesus has weeds getting burned and John has chaff getting burned.
 But the thrust of the message is the same.
 Those who have genuine repentance and faith
 will be taken to Jesus' side.
 Those who don't have faith in Jesus will face the fire of judgement.

So what is the point I'm making?
 I'm not trying to tell you
 that John and Jesus preached exactly the same stuff.
 Clearly there were parts of Jesus' teaching
 about how the end of the ages was fulfilled in him
 where Jesus moved far beyond John.
 But though Jesus opened up a whole new chapter in God's revelation,
 He never moved past the preaching of John.
 He moved beyond John but not past him if you will.
 Jesus told us wonderful new things from God,

But he didn't make anything John said obsolete –
 On the contrary everything Matthew records John as saying
 Jesus reiterated.

Why is this important for us?

Well I think we're a little embarrassed by John's preaching.

John preached for repentance.

John's baptism was a baptism of repentance.

And I think we are shy about calling people to repentance these days.

You hear lots of preaching about accepting the gospel

Because life with Christ in your heart is true life as it is meant to be.

But precious little that is aimed at convicting people of their sin,

Showing them clearly of their need to repent.

Even the label I gave to John earlier

as a hellfire and brimstone preacher.

It's a putdown.

If someone calls me a hellfire and brimstone preacher,

I know exactly what they mean.

They mean that I'm an unreconstructed throwback to a bygone era.

They mean that calling people to repentance is out of date.

They mean that preaching should be warm and inspiring

but not guilt inducing.

Well I'm sorry

but John the Baptist stood up in front of the people of God in his day,

And he told them to repent.

He didn't go and tell pagans to repent.

He told God's people to repent.

He warned them about the dangers of mouthing their belief in God

And not bearing actual fruit in their lives.

And he did it with strong imagery like axes cutting down trees

And chaff being thrown into unquenchable fire.

And everything John said was reiterated by Jesus.

And do you know it's the same

when there have been revivals in the church.

There were great revivals
that took place in the church in the second half of the 18th century.
It was the age of Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley
and George Whitefield.

And let me tell you,

When those guys preached the gospel,

They didn't start with Jesus' death on the cross for your sins.

And they certainly didn't start with

'you've got a God shaped hole in your life

And you will never find satisfaction until you let Jesus into your heart.'

They started with,

"You're a rotten sinner and you are in danger of the fires of hell."

And they didn't finish preaching for repentance

until they could visibly see that the congregation was in tears

because of the weight of their sins.

And when they knew that God's Spirit had been doing his work
of convicting the guilty of their sin.

Then and only then would they preach about the free gift of life
which is available to those who believe.

Why did they spend so long stressing the bad news
before they got to the good news?

Because they were convinced that you can't appreciate a saviour
Until you know what it is that you've been saved from.

You see in the caricature of the hellfire and brimstone preacher,

The preacher gains some perverse satisfaction

in tormenting people with the threat of God's judgement.

The preacher gains power over people because of their fear.

But there's not an ounce of that in Edwards, Wesley or Whitefield.

They preached repentance.

They preached the judgement of God.

But only so that when they got to the free offer of God's grace

People might grasp it eagerly

Like the cold glass of water in a dry desert that it is.

Was that manipulating people?

Not at all.

It was helping people grasp the true nature of reality.
 Edwards, Wesley and Whitefield were no more manipulators
 than John the Baptist.
 And like John the Baptist they used the preaching of repentance
 To prepare the way for Jesus.

Why is the preaching of John the Baptist important for us?
 Because it helps us keep God's perspective
 on where the human race stands before him.
 There's so much foolish misplaced confidence out there.
 Next time someone tells you that they aren't very religious
 But they try to live a good life.
 Why don't you say to them,
 "Friend I don't think that's possible.
 I've tried to live a good life too,
 And I know that my attempts are a failure.
 I look around me
 And nobody else seems much different.
 I know that I can only stand before God because he has cleansed me.
 If God didn't cleanse me himself,
 Then I'd be a lost cause.
 Are you really confident that your life is good enough?"

That's what John the Baptist was dealing with,
 Foolish misplaced confidence.
 People were saying to themselves,
 'We're OK.
 We have Abraham as our Father.
 We've been born as one of God's chosen people.
 We must be OK.'
 John said to them,
 "Do not think you can say to yourselves,
 'We have Abraham as our Father.'
 I tell you that out of these stones
 God can raise up children for Abraham."

Those people thought they would be OK because of their lineage.
It was foolish misplaced confidence.
Only a heart that is truly pure before God is acceptable.
That can only happen by God's grace.
John offered a baptism of repentance.
Not that the water washed away sin.
But it pointed forward to the blood of Jesus which does wash away sin.
And the Baptism pointed to a heart
that did not have a foolish misplaced confidence
in its own righteousness.
A heart that recognised it needed to be cleansed by God.

There is a list as long as your arm
Of things people put their trust in today.
Foolishly they put their trust in the wrong things.
Some think they will stand before God
because they were baptised as infants.
Some think they will stand before God
because they went to Sunday School.
Some think they will stand before God
because forgiveness is his job.
God will forgive, that's his job.
Some think they will stand before God
because they've managed to avoid
the more public and embarrassing sins in their lives.
They've kept the 10 commandments most of the time.
Some think they will stand before God
because they've been generous with their time or money.
Foolish misplaced confidence.
Without repentance and faith in Jesus no one will stand before God.

I think foolish misplaced confidence
is entrenched in the human condition.
In the time of Noah,
They all thought he was mad.

They all thought the rain would stop.
Then they drowned.
People want to think that things will be OK.
It's painful to think that they might not –
So we dismiss the thought.
Australia will never be the target of a war like the Ukraine.
Foolish misplaced confidence.
Banks were lending money to people to buy houses
as if interest rates would never go up again.
Foolish misplaced confidence.
And in the same way
we live amidst an epidemic of foolish misplaced spiritual confidence.
Most people think they will be OK.
Most of them are wrong.
What they need are people who are courageous enough to tell them,
“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”
We need today's equivalent of John the Baptist.

Let's pray that God would raise people like John
to proclaim his message.
People who would convict our generation of their need for a Saviour.
And let's be ready to be God's answer to our own prayers.
God has put you here for a reason!