



5. Another is coming after me (Luke 3:1-20)

In our last sermon on Luke we saw how the young Jesus entered manhood at age 12 by demonstrating to His earthly parents that He was in His Father's house, about His Father's business. He already knew His destiny, but in the following 18 years, He made Himself subject to them and He adopted his earthly father's business of carpentry.

But ultimately His true business was His earthly ministry - His Father's business and we find Him at the age of 30 being induced into His unique office in a unique way. 30 was a significant age - it was the age at which Levites entered the priesthood. The time of preparation was over.

But what sort of person was the Son going to be. This is a question that's answered for us here in the story of John the Baptist. We know from chapter 1 that John was a unique man of God. We are told in this passage this morning that He had a task foretold in Isaiah - to prepare God's people for the coming Saviour. It was He who was to announce that this Saviour was going to do something in their lives that was unheard of.

Of course the people had been expecting a Messiah. It had been foretold in prophecy - notably in Isaiah. Many people thought that he would be a King to destroy the occupying Romans, others thought He would be a priest to restore a proper temple and sacrifices and still others thought that he would be a prophet and teacher like Moses. In retrospect we know He's all three but John announced what had been spoken of since chapter 1 - that the Messiah was coming from God and He would be life -transforming.

John's task was to prepare the people for the Saviour. It was set against a historic background which Luke gives us: *In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar--when Pontiffs Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene-- 2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert.*

Nice that Luke gives us all this stuff. We'd all like to know who Lysanias, tetrarch of Abilene was! That said in those few words, and in the later description of Herod we get the backdrop - the word of God came to John at a time when Judea was occupied by a corrupt Roman emperor who rules through corrupt officials and vassal kings at a time when the true religion had been tainted and compromised by the occupying power - Annas and Caiaphas were high priests. The Romans didn't like Annas and appointed his son Caiaphas. The dispute left them with two when there should only have been one.

John doesn't mince his words: *John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. 9 The ax 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."* He obviously wasn't on a charm offensive then! Jews at that time were very religious but they were a brood of vipers. They taught one thing but lived another way. And their whole society stank of it.

I can't help but make a comparison with God's people in our own society which is so Roman in many ways - pluralistic, tolerant, selfish, materialistic. And as a result they were facing the wrath of God.

I could give you an evangelistic service or an appeal for baptism at this point. But I won't because this encounter in the desert wasn't between John and Gentile unbelievers, but between John and people who prided themselves in being the people of God. And he called them a brood of vipers.

We live in a society where the church is in a steep decline. We know that. I've told you of it enough times. The worse thing about it is that those who are part of it by and large take no responsibility for it. This goes right to the heart of all kinds of Christian expression - including evangelicals.

"We're going God's way aren't we? After all, we've accepted Jesus. we're born again. We're God's family. Why do we need to change? We're faithful, God-fearing evangelicals. We're older and wiser believers". It's an interesting observation, but most of the churches in greatest threat of closure are those with older and "wiser" believers who believe that none of this applies to them.

Here were a people challenged to realise there was a crisis of sin in their nation and in their lives and they had to take responsibility for it. Otherwise God's wrath would be on them. Right from the start of the year, the message God has given me as your Pastor has been one of repentance. We studied the seven churches of Asia, all of it spoke of God's anger being poured out on lukewarmness and death. Much of what we covered was also affirmed as we prayed together on a Thursday evening.

That was the message of John. It was a call for people to deal with their sin and turn around (that's what repentance is) and walk God's way. Baptism was the way they showed that they were taking responsibility and following in John's way and living as people of integrity.

10 "What should we do then?" the crowd asked. 11 John answered, "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same." 12 Tax collectors also came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?" 13 "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them. 14 Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely--be content with your pay." 15 The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ.

The message was a simple one. Live and act like people of integrity. The Law did not oblige them to give away their surplus clothes and food. The Jewish system allowed for tithes, offerings and alms but not this kind of generosity. The civil law allowed tax collectors to collect a "service charge", John said no. Soldiers could plunder if they wanted to - it was the rule of war. John said no. If you think about it, the morality of what John was suggesting is self evident - but the people took the values of the world. They didn't share, they ripped people off and they committed indiscretions because the law allowed them to. But was it of God - of course not. They had brought the values of the world into their faith and had rationalised them as OK.

And that's the church in 2006. We have brought in the world and rationalised it. Yes, we've been good evangelicals and kept some nasty things out, but the world is there. In my experience, non-Christians often behave with more integrity to one another than Christians do. We use law and finance to do business and never ask the question - is this of God? We rationalise our lack of enthusiasm for the lost by saying it's their problem or we don't have time, or we don't have resources. We have tongues in our heads don't we? Then why can't we pray with them and for them? Why can't we speak Christ to them? We love our church buildings but don't care about people. We display the same selfishness and self-centredness that makes us pass by on the other side as our unbelieving neighbours. And we wonder why God's judgement is raining down on us.

Repentance means living God's way according to His mind and will and not ours. That was the message of John.

Repentance under John wasn't just to avoid wrath, but to prepare for Messiah. There was an expectant looking forward for the Messiah because it was he who would be the one who was dynamic and life-transforming. *16 John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."*

For John, the repentance was necessary for the Messiah to do a work in their lives - it was just a preparation - a willingness to deal with sin and follow God's way. And that way led to Jesus. And this is the exciting bit - because God wants us to be a people of power. Jesus is powerful because He baptises with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

I've had a frustrating weekend. My window on the world, the Internet, has been what in computer-speak is called off line. The gizmo which connects me to broadband has become defective and I've got to wait for a new one. I tried connecting to the Internet using the old method called dialup. But is

was so slooow. Only 5 years ago, every bit of internet work I did was on dialup. It worked, but broadband does things faster and more efficiently than dialup.

Jesus is broadband to John's dialup. John just got people wet when he dunked them in the Jordan, but Jesus dunks people with the Holy Spirit. What happens when you get dunked in a pool - you get wet. You look wet, you feel wet. When Jesus dunks us into the Spirit, His power pervades us.

Let me ask you a question. What has been your experience of the Holy Spirit? What we do know is that in Christ we have the Holy Spirit in our lives, but have we been well and truly dunked with Him. If you get wet, people can see you're wet. If you get immersed with the Spirit, they should be able to see Jesus in you, you should know something of the presence and the power of God in your life. God wants each of us to have a power relationship through the Spirit. If we don't then we've dried out. It's such a pity that talk of Holy Spirit baptism sends some Christians into a state of panic.

What is plain from this passage is that Jesus brings baptism with the Holy Spirit. Rather than some remarkable optional extra, being immersed with the Spirit is part and parcel of our encounter with Christ. God wants us to experience His power and also be people through whom He can exercise the power of the Spirit.

However, there's more because Jesus doesn't only baptise with the Spirit but with fire. What is fire? The passage explains itself: *He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.* Fire is always a picture of purification in the Bible. In verse 17 we see that He has the responsibility of judgement. But all believers are baptised with fire. Why? Just repenting and asking forgiveness is one thing, but only Jesus has the power to cleanse and purify our lives. That's what he achieved on Calvary.

Luke just gives us two verses on the baptism of Jesus by John. Why did He have to be baptised. He didn't need to be forgiven of sins. Can I suggest two reasons why He did it. First of all it signified that His life from now on would be dedicated to the Father. That was one of the meanings of John's baptism. The second reason which is a lot weaker was one where He was identifying with men. He may have not sinned, but He would later take on the sins of the world. Baptism was the taking on of responsibility for sin. Jesus took responsibility for our sin so that we could walk God's way, know the power of the Spirit and know the complete cleansing of our lives so that we are fit to serve and follow the Father. The baptism of Jesus is in all four gospels and it is one of the most open affirmations of the Trinity you'll get in Scripture.

And all that was just scratching the surface of this. It's a potentially life-changing passage for you and me this morning. Do we want to have a faith and a church that moves in the power of God? Then it starts with repentance as we renounce our sinful ways and follow Jesus. If people and churches are not moving in the power of God, then it usually means that there are unresolved issues that they have not dealt with. Jesus wants you to identify them and deal with them. He's given us His Spirit to enable us to examine and deal with sin in all.

Now you see the scale of the problem too. If the church is in decline then it is in disobedience and it's time for the people to rise up and pray - and repent.

God wants to pour out His Spirit. He wants us to be well and truly dunked in the Spirit. Does your life lack power. Do we want to see the power of God working in this church? I want to see changed lives, changed circumstances, God working in power, changing lives, bringing healing and all the rest. It starts as we deal with sin, repent and follow God's will. If we're not seeing it, then we need to look at sin and unbelief in our lives. He can baptise with fire because he can deal with sin to the uttermost.

What about you?