

Preparing for Lent

Luke 3 v 1-20

Context:

We are just a few days away from the beginning of Lent, a season for spiritual reflection and transformation as we prepare for the celebration of Holy Week and Easter. Lent is traditionally a time when people either give things up, take things up, or sometimes both. How will you make the most of Lent this year? In today's study we explore the beginning of John the Baptist's prophetic ministry, and we see how he sought to prepare people for the coming of the Messiah and the long-hoped for day of the Lord. What can we learn from him that may help and inspire us in our preparations for Lent?

Observation:

1. What was the historical context given by Luke in v 1-2a?
2. What happened at this time according to v 2b?
3. What did John do in response (v 3)?
4. Which OT prophet did Luke quote from in v 4 to explain what John was doing and what was the quote (v4-6)?
5. What strong words did John say to those coming out to see him (v 7-9)?
6. How did the crowd respond to John's words in v 10?
7. What was John's reply in v 11?
8. Which specific group questioned John next in v 12 and what did they ask?
9. What was John's reply in v 13?
10. Who questioned John next in v 14 and how did he reply?
11. What was the general mood of the crowd according to v 15?
12. How did John address this mood in v 16-18?
13. Who did John confront in v 19 and why? What was the consequence in v 20?

Meaning:

1. The historical facts given by Luke in v 1-2a date the beginning of John the Baptist's ministry to around the year 30AD (Tiberius Caesar ruled from 14-37AD). Why do you think Luke was so keen to give the historical context like this and how might it help us to have confidence in the Bible? – see also Luke 1 v 1-4.
2. Why do you think John was living in the wilderness and *how* do you think the word of God came to him (v2b)?
3. Luke quotes from the OT prophet Isaiah to explain what John was doing (v 4-6). Read the quote in its longer context in Isaiah 40 v 1-11 and discuss why Luke uses this quote to explain John's ministry and what expectations he might have had for both John's and Jesus' ministries.
4. Based on prophecies in the OT, the common expectation of the coming of the Messiah and the day of the Lord was twofold – blessing and restoration for the righteous with judgement and punishment for the unrighteous. In v 7-9 John focuses only on the judgement and punishment. What images does John use in v 7-9 to describe the people coming out to him, the judgement that is coming, and what they needed to do to escape it?

5. Why would simply claiming to be a blood descendant of Abraham not be enough to save them (v 8)?
6. What practical examples does John give in v 10-14 to illustrate the fruit of repentance and the kind of life God is looking for in his people?
7. Who do you think John is referring to in v 16 and why?
8. In v 16-18 John describes the two opposite expectations of what the Messiah will do when he comes – on the one hand he will baptise some with the Holy Spirit (v 16), gathering them like wheat into his barn (v 17); on the other hand he will baptise others with unquenchable fire (v 16), burning them up like chaff (v 17). To what extent do you think Jesus fulfilled these expectations and why does Luke call this proclamation ‘good news’ in v 18?
9. What kind of courage do you think it would have taken for John to rebuke Herod (v 19) and what was the final outcome for him? – see Matthew 14 v 3-12.

Application:

1. John clearly believed the proclamation of the good news should include being honest about God’s coming judgement and punishment for those who do not repent. Should we also include this truth in our Gospel proclamation today and, if so, how can we do it in a way that doesn’t just turn people off?
2. John made it clear that repentance and righteousness is very practical in its outworking, being demonstrated in our generosity to the poor and our integrity at work. How is God calling you to put these principles into practice in your life today?
3. John was willing to pay the cost of speaking the truth to power. What might be some of the costs for us of speaking up for the truth of the Gospel in our world today?

Pray:

- Thank God for the historical truth and reliability of the Bible.
- Thank God for the good news that through Jesus we can escape God’s coming fiery judgement.
- Pray for courage and power to speak up for the truth of Jesus, whatever the cost.
- Pray for God’s grace to turn away from sin and to produce the fruit of repentance and righteousness in generosity to the poor and integrity at work.

Sermon Notes: