

**Advent 2**      Luke 3:1-6      Telephone Service      Tim Collins

A very clear time; a very clear place. As the historian he likes to be, Luke definitely sets things out well, providing a clear context for what is to follow.

And, through John, he sets out a very clear message.

But it is not a message the rulers and leaders want to hear.

Because this is a message of hope, a message of a fulfilment of a promise.

Because this is a message from God direct to the people – not distorted or interpreted to suit the powers that be; a message that is clear, direct.

And powerful!

This is a message of change. And authorities don't like change; authorities want things to stay as they are, they like the status quo – because that way they retain their power; they retain their privileges. They don't have to suffer all the challenges and chances of day to day life. They are safe and secure.

But John's message from the wilderness changes all of that. It challenges; it encourages the people to question, to think, to look beyond their own lives.

This time of Tiberias and Pilate, of Herod and Annas and Caiaphas was a dark and discouraging time in Israel. A time of cultural and political unrest. But for the women and men who knew God and were sensitive to Him, it was a time for prayer and seeking, a time of hope that He was about to do a new thing among His chosen people.

And into this time of turmoil and expectation, "came a man, sent from God, whose name was John. He was not the Light of God, but he came to testify to the coming Light." John's ministry was deep in the wilderness of the River Jordan.

He knew what he was sent to do. He clearly knew what his mission was. He wasn't the Promised One; he wasn't going to be anointed. His mission was to pave the way, to prepare the ground, to open people's hearts and minds for the great and powerful work of God which would be done in and through Jesus.

His message is simple, is clear - Repent and prepare yourselves for all that is to come.

John's presence is the very essence of preparation, and a profound challenge to the secular world today, just as much as it was in Israel 2000 years ago.

2000 years ago, the authorities were so challenged by John that they arrested him, and eventually beheaded him. They knew that what he spoke was the truth, but a truth that was just too difficult for them to accept; because if the people really listened then all that they had built up would come tumbling down. And they had too much invested in it to see it all come apart. But they had forgotten who they were and why they were there.

And today? I believe that John's message is just as relevant, just as powerful, just as challenging as it was to the Romans, to the Temple authorities, to the people of God.

Because his message challenges us to prepare for the coming of Christ not through the stresses and strains of bending to the material, commercial world, but to look inward at our spiritual selves; to think about the way we live our lives; to examine not **what** we're doing for Christmas but **why**!

So, before we can appreciate the voice of the shepherd's story, before the song of angels, before the gifts from the Wise Men, we need to first prepare ourselves and listen to that strident, distant voice crying from the wilderness.

Now, John's not preaching out into the wilderness because he thought the desert might be a good place to spread his message. He cried out in the

wilderness in a type of ritual re-enactment of Moses' deliverance of the slaves from Egypt to the Promised Land.

Desert and river – deep symbols of liberation from oppression and of coming home.

But now, as Israel groans under the weight of Roman imperialism and Temple authoritarianism, John calls out from the wilderness. A call that echoes down the years. And without doubt, his apocalyptic cry has deep political overtones. Some will have heard it as the preparation for liberation from Roman domination; as the beginning of the coming reign of a very different king.

Yet, to our ears today, words like “politics” “oppression,” “imperialism” and “liberation” seem intrusive on our modern Advent meditations. Who wants to hear the harsh voice of the Baptist howling, “Prepare the Way of the Lord! Make his paths straight!”? Surely, we would more readily welcome his words if his announcement was a little quieter, a little less strident, more akin to “O, you better watch out. You better not cry. Jesus Christ is coming to town!”

But guess what, when the words John quoted were first declared, they did come as welcome words. Because they spoke of change, of hope; of the love of God for the people. And, once again, guess what? They are just as true today as they were 2000 years ago – perhaps even more so.

John's message is a message of preparation, of hope. Of love.

And in preparing ourselves for the arrival of Christ, John declares that we are to re-think our priorities; we are to turn away from those things that ruin the world; that ruin our lives. And we are to turn towards God. To be baptised, to be cleansed in body, mind and soul. To be ready to accept the promise of the hope and love that is coming.

Prepare a way for the Lord! Make **your** paths straight!

Remove the injustices and inequities that block God's pathway. Lift up those valleys sunken by despair and despondency. Knock down the haughty hills of pride and prejudice.

So, as we prepare ourselves, our families, our homes for Christmas, as we face the onslaught of that strange mix of the sacred and the secular, are we ready to open our ears to hear what John is saying?

Because, as the streets are decorated with lights; and fake snow is sprayed on windows - the time is close at hand.

Because, as we make our shopping list and check it twice - the kingdom is coming!

Because, as we decorate the tree and get out the Christmas recipes - God has a foot in the door.

Just as he called to the people of Israel to turn away from what they were doing and to turn to God, so John the Baptist calls to us to look again at the preparations we make for the miracle in the manger.

In the crowdedness of this mad, intense, amazing, incredible, wonder-filled season that is upon us, the voice of the lonely wilderness preacher calls to us:

to open our ears;

to open our hearts

To stop;

to think

and to wonder at the hope;

and to wonder at the promise of love held out to us at Advent. Amen