

**Isaiah 40** <sup>1</sup> A voice of one calling: In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.<sup>4</sup> Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.<sup>5</sup> And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.<sup>6</sup> A voice says, 'Cry out.' And I said, 'What shall I cry?' 'All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.<sup>7</sup> The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them. Surely the people are grass.<sup>8</sup> The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures for ever.'<sup>9</sup> You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, 'Here is your God!'<sup>10</sup> See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him.<sup>11</sup> He tends his flock like a shepherd: he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

**John 1** <sup>19</sup> Now this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was.<sup>20</sup> He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, 'I am not the Messiah.'<sup>21</sup> They asked him, 'Then who are you? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.'<sup>22</sup> 'Are you the Prophet?' He answered, 'No.'<sup>23</sup> Finally they said, 'Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?' John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, 'I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, "Make straight the way for the Lord."<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Now the Pharisees who had been sent<sup>25</sup> questioned him, 'Why then do you baptise if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?'

<sup>26</sup> 'I baptise with water,' John replied, 'but among you stands one you do not know.'<sup>27</sup> He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.'

<sup>28</sup> This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptising.<sup>29</sup> The next day John saw Jesus coming towards him and said,

'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!<sup>30</sup> This is the one I meant when I said, "A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me."<sup>31</sup> I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptising with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.'

<sup>32</sup> Then John gave this testimony: 'I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him.<sup>33</sup> And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptise with water told me, "The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptise with the Holy Spirit."<sup>34</sup> I have seen and I testify that this is God's Chosen One.

The culture of our nation and our local community often feels like a spiritual desert, with most people politely indifferent to Christianity, to Jesus, to the very idea that he has any real relevance to their lives. At the moment, people seem to be far more focussed on being rescued by the new Covid vaccine than by Jesus. Every so often, especially at Christmas, we make a special effort to share the gospel, but even though wonderfully we see individuals coming into our church and coming to faith, we have yet to see the Holy Spirit being poured out in revival. Is all our effort worth it.

John described himself as a voice in the desert. Context: *Bethany, the other side of Jordan (different from the Bethany where Martha and Mary live) – barren desert.* However, people were longing, hoping and expecting someone to come and rescue them – from the Romans, from corrupt local kings like Herod, from disease and illness, from economic hardship, from any particular mess in their lives that they found themselves in.

*the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was.* We are told that he confessed freely – but three times he says: "I am not": *the Messiah....Elijah....the prophet i.e. the prophet Moses had foretold*

John is not being evasive, but just being careful not to claim more for himself than he should: *All I am is a voice with a pretty impossible job: calling in the wilderness – a sense of no-one really listening.*

*But I am the one was foretold by the prophet Isaiah as coming before the Messiah. And he is not only coming soon, but is here already among us – it's just that none of you has yet recognised Him. In fact, says John, I myself have only just discovered who it is.*

John proclaimed his message because of his great sense of calling. *Do you remember how at John's birth, his father Zechariah had prophesied over John - the Benedictus.* Most of this prophesy was about John's birth being a sign that God was about to send his Messiah –just 2 out of 12 verses about John himself: *And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him<sup>77</sup> to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God*

John was a voice in the desert and this spiritual desert that John was speaking into was precisely the reason why the people needed a Messiah and why they needed to get ready. It was not a case of them being poor passive victims who would be gathered up and rescued by a Messiah in shining armour. This Saviour would require them to be ready to follow wherever he led them and that meant being willing to change, to repent, to seek to lead godly and holy lives and therefore to be baptized with water as a sign of this commitment and faith.

Jesus is of course our Saviour – but He came not primarily to rescue us from difficult situations but from the results of sin in our own lives and hearts. Yes, this Messiah would be riding into battle, but not against Roman armies but against the whole host of evil, nor on a white charger, but on a cross. This is why John refers to him as the *Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*

What does this title mean? John's audience would certainly have known. Only a few dozen miles away in the great Temple in Jerusalem, every day the priests were sacrificing lambs for the sins of the people. These sacrifices were a reminder of the terrible cost of sin, as well as a re-assurance that God in his grace offered free and full forgiveness to any who truly confessed their sin to Him.

This ancient tradition of sacrificing lambs went back of course to the very earliest days of the history of Israel – maybe 1400 years earlier – and itself pointed back to something earlier still – the sacrificing of lambs in Egypt on that first terrible *Passover*, just before the children of Israel escaped the slavery of Egypt and were told that the angel of death would visit every household in the land and the first-born male of each family would die – *unless*, they sacrificed a lamb and painted some of its blood on the door-posts.

And then going back even further: to the story of their founding father, Abraham climbing up Mount Moriah to sacrifice his one and only beloved son Isaac. *As the two of them went on together,<sup>7</sup> Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, 'Father, where is the lamb for the burnt offering?'<sup>8</sup> Abraham answered, 'God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.'* Sure enough, just as Abraham was about to sacrifice his only beloved son, the *angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, 'Abraham! Abraham! Do not lay a hand on the boy. Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son.'*<sup>14</sup> So Abraham called that place *The Lord Will Provide.*

So, the *Lamb of God* is the one who dies in our place to take away our sin and the guilt that is attached to it, so that we may truly be God's sons and daughters. But Jesus as the *Lamb of God* doesn't just take away our sin, or the sin of the Jews, but the sin of the world, of people from all nations, all races, all backgrounds.

It is interesting, however, that this title and the Messiah in his saving role, is not the first way John the Baptist describes Jesus. His first title for the one coming after him, i.e. Jesus, is *Lord*. *'I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, "Make straight the way for the Lord."* And this is not just any lord, but *The Lord*. John is quoting from our Old Testament passage, *Isaiah 40<sup>1</sup> A voice of one calling: In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*

As far as both John the Baptist, and John the Evangelist writing the gospel, are concerned, and indeed all the apostles, when Jesus comes into the world as Messiah – this is God coming to the world.

No wonder John the Baptist says: *He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.*

*A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me."*

Normally if someone was before me and now he is coming after me, that would mean *I* had overtaken *him* – but no, John puts it the other way round: *He has surpassed me – I am only the messenger, the fore-runner, the herald, but even though Jesus may have been born 6 months after me – he was before me because he was with the heavenly Father before the creation of the world.*

Jesus himself says the same thing in *John 8:58* *Jesus answered, 'Very truly I tell you, 'before Abraham was born, I am!'*

It is therefore not surprising that it wasn't just the crowds who did not recognise Jesus of Nazareth as being the Messiah, but until this moment, John did not either! He says: *I myself did not know him.* After all, Jesus was John's own cousin – they had grown up together. No doubt he thought Jesus was a wonderful, gifted, godly, loving person; but it's a very big step from that to recognising that Jesus is the Messiah. That only happened when Jesus came forward, along with all the others in the crowd, to be baptised. At that moment John sees the Holy Spirit come down and resting on Jesus – either in the form of a dove, or in *the manner* of a dove landing on something and resting there – and it is at that moment that John realises that his amazing cousin is none other than the one he and all of Israel had been waiting for – the Messiah, the Lamb of God, *God's Chosen One, the Lord.*

John had shaped his entire life by faith with his calling to prepare the way for the Messiah, even though he had no idea who, or where, the Messiah was.

He firmly trusted that if he faithfully proclaimed the message and baptised people, then at some point the Messiah would appear. <sup>31</sup> *I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptising with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.'* And now this incognito Messiah, had indeed been revealed.

*What about us?* We don't know when, or where, Jesus is going to act, where He is going to reveal himself. But like John, we believe He is here, He is in our midst and he is coming. Like John, we are called to live out our baptism as those who have been washed clean by Jesus, who have died to our old lives and are called to live for him and to share the good news of his love.

If we do that – if we remain faithful to our calling then one day Jesus will make himself known – the Lord will show up.