

Preparing the Way

Advent 3
December 2018

Luke 3:1-14

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

3 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene,² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.³ And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.⁴ As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

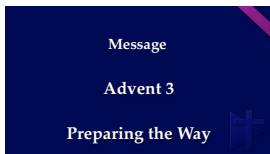
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.

⁵ Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall become straight,
and the rough places shall become level ways,

⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

⁷ He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” ⁸ Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. ⁹ Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, “What then shall we do?” ¹¹ And he answered them, “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.” ¹² Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” ¹³ And he said to them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.” ¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.”



Opening

It's the 3rd Sunday of Advent and this season is really speaking to me about us as Trinity Church. Two weeks ago I spoke about seeking holiness as personal integrity and how that involved exercising forgiveness. There were some questions asked that day and later.

Then last week in the December All Age service we heard the same message brought in the words of Isaiah spoken by John the Baptist in anticipation of God's coming to his people:

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make his paths straight.

⁵ Every valley shall be filled,
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⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”



That instruction came with the promise that when the roads were straight and level for God all people would see his glory. That was read again today to make sure that what John the Baptist said next is heard in context.

I hear this speaking to several conversations and issues in our Church right now so I am going to bring that out.

Text

So if we join John the Baptist in the time just before Jesus begins his ministry. He tells people to prepare for a personal revelation of God in a way that all people can recognise.

He uses the imagery of road building as expressed by Isaiah in chapter 40.3-5 where five centuries earlier he prophesied God's redemption of his people from their Babylonian exile. Isaiah paints pictures of valleys being filled in, mountains levelled and crooked tracks being made straight. It is what happens in constructing a highway - or in today's language: a 'motorway' - for safe and fast travel.



I commented previously on this being understood in terms of making holy the relationships both between us and God and among ourselves. Today I want to say some more about this and then come back to forgiveness and reconciliation.

The first and 'natural response'

So back to John the Baptist in today's reading from Luke 3.

He makes the call for people to prepare so they and all flesh will see God when he comes. The Messiah was coming close.

There is a response to John's call for people to seek holiness as they come to him for the baptism of cleansing he was ministering in the Jordan River. You might think this is great but John is not impressed so he lets people know: (Luke 3.7-9)

He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. ⁹Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."



It would seem that the sacramental or ritual response to John's call does not impress him. That is 'nice' but not what he is looking for.

Instead he is looking for the fruits of repentance in the lives of people coming to him. Those he labels a 'brood of vipers' have been shocked enough to take insurance measures against any coming of God that might involve judgement. A little water in the Jordan is small premium against divine punishment. It's typical religious thinking that mocks God by pretending cheap obedience.

So he begins to tackle and destroy the beliefs that prevent people repenting in earnest.

#1 There is Jewish chauvinism or racial arrogance. He reminds those concerned that God's judgment begins with the House of God and the Tree of Israel can be pruned at ground level if it is fruitless. The axe is ready for this, the chainsaw motor is running.

The people get it:

"Ah, we need to change and show a change of heart through a change of behaviour."

¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, “What then shall we do?”

At which point the practical instruction to real people in real life begins.

So #2, he gets practical to people with spare clothes or food, tax collectors and soldiers:

¹¹ And he answered them,

“Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.”

¹² Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” ¹³ And he said to them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.” - No rip-offs.

¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.”

So that is John the Baptist’s teaching in down to earth repentance orientated outcomes.

He wanted to see a change in behaviour indicating a serious quest for holiness and not just piety and ritual.

Anyone can light a candle or get sprinkled with water. He wanted to see real change.

So that was then.

Today the message of Isaiah from around five centuries before Christ and its echoing through John the Baptist in his day still speaks to our ears.

Let me build the links:

- As Trinity Church we are about being the Church of Jesus Christ.
- We each seek to be the living stones that he lays one upon the other
- Jesus builds us to be his church as a fellowship,

- As Trinity Church we are about being the Church of Jesus Christ.
- We each seek to be the living stones that he lays one upon the other to create the habitation of the Holy Spirit among people. ¹
- Jesus builds us to be his church as a fellowship, a relationally linked network of people able to live and demonstrate his life within them and among them.

What I am saying here is all language brought by Jesus and the Apostles found in the New Testament after John the Baptist.

I want to draw three relevant points out of this:

- 1) The essence of the Church as Jesus intended it is relational and spiritual fellowship. Jesus prayed that we would be one as he and the Father are one so that the world may know or in other language: “All flesh may see the glory of God” which is so much more than coffee and tea after a church service.

That is why when the Holy Spirit fell as he did at Pentecost the second focal point for devotion by the new church after the Apostle’s teaching was ‘the fellowship’²

¹ 1Peter 2.4-5. ⁴ As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, ⁵ you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

² Acts 2.42. ⁴² And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

- 2) My second point picks up on something that gets discussed at Council lately: What is a 'great church'? A 'great church' is one with healthy, strong spiritual fellowship. That is the critical issue.

It is the extent that church members are truly together and joined by bonds of common faith and unity living in the love of the Lord that establishes a great church. Towards that you need Apostolic teaching and the nurture of Prayers and Holy Communion, but the essence of *koinonia*-fellowship, is spiritual, interpersonal and heart-felt familial-love as shared life in Christ. That is why the first church knew to devote themselves to their fellowship in the Lord. It requires much work including repenting and forgiving.

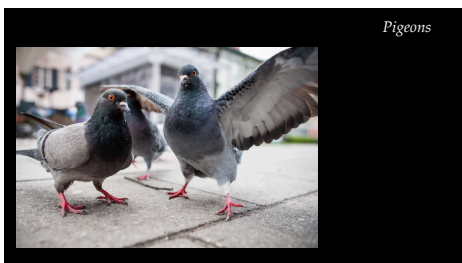
- 3) And thirdly, As already implied: in the Church of Jesus Christ as he purposed it, the Holy Spirit builds and works in and through the fellowship so if the fellowship is blocked, divided, polluted or broken, guess what? The Holy Spirit cannot work. If we cannot maintain or preserve the unity of the Spirit in this fellowship the Holy Spirit departs.

One way to visualise this is with reference to the Holy Spirit as a dove and contrast that with pigeons. In our neighbourhoods I see a few doves and many more pigeons.



The dove representing the Holy Spirit is a quiet peaceful and careful bird. They don't make a lot of noise and move elegantly. If there is a lot of noise or commotion they do not come. So to prepare to receive doves you need to have things quiet and settled. You also need to watch as they will not make noise to alert you.

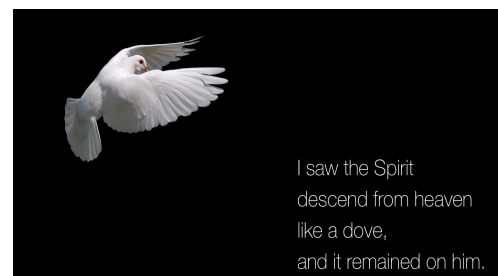
The dove is an obvious symbol of the Holy Spirit.



The contrast to doves are pigeons. They are loud, clumsy, greedy, prone to squabbling and very public about everything. They leave a mess like a two year-old's breakfast. On very hot days I have seen them throw their young out of the nest to the ground below.

We are seeking the presence of the Holy Spirit who comes like a dove and not a pigeon.

When our fellowship is open and clean, he comes, quietly as a dove to do his work in peace and calm in the love of the church.



That is what I have in mind as the application of firstly Isaiah's and then John the Baptist's Advent message to us today as Church: "Prepare the Way of the Lord – straighten out the bonds of fellowship, remove the blocks to unity in the Spirit so that the Spirit of the Lord may come afresh such that all flesh may see it."

Application:

With that in mind, let's get practical and look at what this involves.

Let me ask a question:

Q: Are your relationships within church all clean, holy and open to the Holy Spirit coming as a dove?

Q: Is your heart full of love for all the brothers and sisters?

This is the coal-face or where rubber meets road. This is the 'Fellowship frontier'.

This is where we determine whether we are a great church according to Jesus or something else.

If our fellowship with each other in the Lord is damaged or impaired it is usually because something happened or did not happen.

Offense has been created. Something has been done or said, expectations have not been met and it causes hurt. That hurt stays within us and can lead to bitterness and division.

To look at this I want to get practical and have you think about your own place in fellowship.

Q: Can you think of a hurt that is still alive for you and breaks fellowship?
It is something that insulates you from people?

Q: What are our options with which to seek to heal this break in fellowship?

How might we repair fellowship?

What are the options?

Typical Responses fall into 3 categories:

- A. Management: Structure things so that the 'problem' goes away.
 - a. Isolate, avoid, ignore or marginalise
 - b. Apply rules that might regulate the person or behaviours concerned
 - c. Reward or punish – enforcement too.

These responses may have their place but not to start with.
They are blunt tools.

- B. Manipulate: Talk to others.
 - a. Official complaints eg: re. Pastor write to Bishop - like calling police to fix the other while not attending to the relationship.
 - b. Unofficial sharing or gossip to gain support
 - c. Restoring one's honour through satisfaction of an apology to the standard you require.³ - not what Jesus taught.

Again, These responses may have their place but not to start with.
They are blunt tools.

- C. Minister Reconciliation as a Disciple.

Paul put it this way to the troubled Church in Corinth (2 Corinthians 5:17-19), mindful of how the world handles broken relationships.

³ The only example of an apology I can find in the Bible came from the magistrates of Philippi to Paul and Silas when they realized they had imprisoned Roman citizens. cf Acts 16:35-39

Bible Teaching on Restoring Fellowship (A)

2 Corinthians 5:17-19

¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. ¹⁸ All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

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Q: Reconciliation is whose ministry?

A: Us = us.

As we no longer apply worldly or fleshy management and manipulation in the Church to solve relational issues we seek to repair the fellowship Jesus prayed for by reconciliation in the ways he taught.

In this we need to have our eye on the all-important task of reconciliation and not be counting trespasses against us or settling scores or solving social problems. The business is spiritual unity not personal vindication. This is what Jesus himself modelled to us.

Q: How do we do this?

A: I am going to Colossians 3:12-14 and Matthew 18:15-17.

Paul writing to the Colossians:

Bible Teaching on Restoring Fellowship (B)

Colossians 3:12-14

¹² Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, ¹³ bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

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So the first response to offense within the church -which can take a while- is to forgive as you have been forgiven.

Our commitment to seeking whole and healthy fellowship in the Lord involves extending Christ's grace as we have received it.

When my toes are stomped on I find this instruction enough. I forgive and move on. It is not easy. I may feel indignant for a while.

However, if remains a live issue that really needs to be dealt with I go to Matthew 18:15-17:

Bible Teaching on Restoring Fellowship (C)

Matthew 18:15-17

¹⁵ "If your brother sins against you,
#1 go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.
#2 ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.
#3 ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.
#4 And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

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#4 And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

The heart and purpose of this even after forgiving them in your heart is repairing fellowship, regaining a brother or sister.

This is the down to earth business of preparing the way of the Lord in Church – repairing the fellowship, preserving the unity of the Holy Spirit.

What do you make of this church?

Is there work to do in preparing ourselves for Christ's coming?