

Luke 3:1-6 9am 5.12.21

Bring on the bulldozers. As I look out of my window at home, I see the daily activity of bulldozers and diggers constructing a new road – as they prepare to build a whole new set of houses. It's a constant reminder of this passage from Luke.

But today's Gospel begins not with the quote from Isaiah nor John the Baptist's call to repentance, but with a long and detailed list of rulers.

Luke's catalogue of imperial, regional, and religious authorities does more than date John's ministry, it also contrasts human kingdoms with God's reign. The claims to authority, that Tiberius or Herod or the high priest may make, are not ultimate. God's people owe allegiance first and foremost to God. And it is God's **word** that sets John's ministry in motion.

V 2 the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah.

John has been commissioned to prepare the way. Prepare the way, not for lord Caesar or any earthly lords, but for the one true Lord.

And where was John when God's word came? He was in the wilderness...

Like Moses, like the prophetic voice in Isaiah 40, John challenges God's people to see the wilderness as a place, not of desolation, but a place of hope. God is calling them, like the enslaved in Egypt and like the Babylonian exiles, to leave their captors behind and head home - through the wilderness.

And John preaches that the first step on this journey toward freedom is - a baptism of repentance.

John's hearers would have been familiar with two kinds of baptism at that time:

Firstly, the baptism by which Gentile converts became Jews and so embarked on a whole new way of life;

and the second – was the ritual washing of cleansing, that was done, if they turned from their sins and obeyed God.

Both types called for changed behaviour and John's baptism of repentance does the same too.

Repentance (Greek *metanoia*) is not mere regret for past misdeeds. It means far more than saying, "I'm sorry. Please forgive me." *Metanoia* means a change of mind and heart, the kind of inner transformation that bears visible fruit.

In the Gospel for next Sunday, when the crowds ask him what they need to do, John will spell out precisely the sorts of fruit God expects to see (Luke 3:10–14) and our visiting preacher archdeacon Andy Wooding-Jones will speak into this next Sunday.

So *metanoia* – a turning away, a change of heart and mind.

Another word that is important here is release John proclaims a baptism of repentance that leads to release from sins. Release (Greek *aphesis*) is the same word that Jesus uses twice in Luke 4:18 to describe his very mission: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me ... to proclaim *release* to the captives and ... to let the oppressed *go free* ..."

As we know, the release or forgiveness that follows repentance, does not undo past sins, but it does unbind people from them. It's lifesaving and opens the way for a life lived in God's service. By proclaiming

such release, John fulfills his father's prophecy, that we read in Luke 1:77 – which part of what we call the song of Zechariah... “you, child, ... will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people... by the forgiveness – or release..(*aphesis*) of their sins”.

The knowledge of salvation....How we see this salvation, how we see the importance of a heart and mind change, how we see this wiping clean of our sin, affects how we live out our Christian life. You see...This salvation, according to the prophesy to Zechariah... looks like a new dawn for those trapped in darkness. It is light that reveals a new path, the way toward peace.

Let me read a little more from the song of Zechariah

V 78 – by the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness, and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Isn't that a wonderful image of guiding our feet to the way of peace.

So, John is preparing the Lord's path toward peace...and the preparation that is required involves overturning the world as we know it.

John quotes the prophet Isaiah to describe the earth-shaking transformation that must take place.

Again, wonderful evocative language about valleys being filled full, mountains and hills made low, everything crooked made straight and true.

That word – made low – the mountains being made low is the same word as humble..(*tapeinoo*). Mary, in her song, the Magnificat, sings of the God who has looked on her humble state (*tapeinosis*). She praises the One who saves by dethroning the powerful and exalting the humble (*tapeinous*), sending the rich away empty-handed and filling up the hungry.

So, John is heralding the coming of a new world order. Through repentance, letting God humble everything that is proud and self-satisfied in us, and letting God heal and lift up what is broken and beaten down.

The claims that the world's authorities make, often conflict with God's claims and we don't have to look very far to see this in today's news.

Paths that seem satisfactory to us are not good enough for God. John calls us to let God's bulldozers reshape the world's social systems **and** the landscape of our own minds and hearts. God's ways are not our ways.

But God's ways lead to salvation. God's glory will be revealed in Jesus, the judge who comes to save us. This is the good news that John proclaims, and it is good news not just for us, but for the whole world: all flesh will see God's salvation.

This is God's promise, and our hope. Bring on the bulldozers. Let's prepare the way in our hearts and for others.

Amen.