

Luke 3:7 to 18, 9.30 am

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord our strength and our redeemer Amen

Our Gospel reading today concerns the ministry of John the Baptist the last of the Old Testament prophets.

We have his rather strange birth story in Luke chapter 1, where we read how an angel visited Zechariah and told him that his wife Elizabeth, in her old age, will bare a son who he will call John.

And the angel went on to say that he will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord our God.

But because Zechariah would not believe the angel, the angel made him mute until the things the angel had said came to pass, so John was always destined from birth to welcome Jesus, the Son of God.

Now John's birth wasn't the only thing that was strange about him. We need to remember that there wasn't at that time anybody living in Israel who had ever heard a prophet speak, or indeed knew anybody from their childhood who had heard a prophet speak, so John was very special indeed, if not unique at that time.

In fact, he had already shown extraordinary qualities of persuasion, in that, what appeared to be hundreds of people, had been persuaded to follow him into the desert to the river Jordan, and to submit to baptism.

Here again was a strange thing for anybody to do, because Jews had lived for centuries with the view, that being descendants of Abraham, they would automatically be saved, not because they were righteous or good, but because they were Jews, members of the chosen race.

Before John started baptising for the forgiveness of sins, there were some baptisms in Israel, but these were exclusively for Gentiles who wanted to convert to Judaism, to worship God and attend the synagogue, but the indications are that all these people who followed John into the desert, were already Jews.

So John was the first recorded occasion where baptism for the forgiveness of sins is recorded in the Bible, and indeed it may have been the first occasion ever, certainly for Jews.

But John was tasked, from childhood with the job of preparing the Jews for the coming of Jesus, and despite tradition to the contrary, he did prepare them with his ministry of repentance and baptism at the river Jordan.

Later on, after our reading, John also introduced Jesus to the Jews, again through baptism, and through baptism also launched Jesus into his ministry of proclaiming the good news of God.

Repentance of course is the inescapable beginning of our faith in Jesus Christ, and John's message was about repentance, the necessary preparation for any of us if we are to be in a relationship with our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and thereby in a relationship with God.

John's opening words were, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near". John knew that Jesus was at hand, and was about to make an appearance; that's why John enticed people to the Jordan, and why he was preparing them with a baptism of forgiveness.

But then, on this particular day, John said to the crowds that came out to see him and be baptised by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come".

I wonder what would happen if I took the same approach here at St Michael's. Perhaps not.

But it does remind me, when I was church warden, and after Roger Packer left, that David Bryant and I were tasked, among other things, to get ministers for the services every Sunday, and on one particular Sunday Peter Holmes said to me, 'don't ask him again, he's a pew emptier.

But in this case John's remark about a brood of vipers didn't have the same effect that I believe it would have had here.

Clearly God was with him and God had either allowed him to have an extraordinary good relationship with the crowd such that he could get away with that, or whether he had been endowed with considerable charisma we don't know, but what ever it was, it did allow him to be very blunt.

But on this particular day some people came who were known to John as people who were no better than a brood of vipers, and he was quite prepared to tell them so.

Now rather than naming their faults, he took the more constructive and positive view of telling them what they should do to be saved, he told them to bear fruits worthy of repentance.

And indeed this positive attitude of helping them, rather than just criticising them, probably helped John's cause as well.

John then anticipated their possible reply to his baptising fellow Jews by saying to them, "Do not begin to say to yourselves. "We have Abraham as our ancestor", because that won't work.

John was saying that they were to take personal responsibility for their actions, and that they would be judged on what they did, it was no good saying that Abraham was our ancestor therefore we will be saved no matter what we do, no, it won't work.

Just because you are descendants of Abraham doesn't automatically mean that you are in a right relationship with God, this indeed was a long standing hurdle that the Jews had to overcome, and those who managed to over come the hurdle were baptised.

John went on to say, "For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham". The stones are a metaphor for the Gentiles that John prophesied correctly would be raised to Abraham instead of them if they didn't repent and turn to God.

That was a very significant prophetic statement by John. It meant that if the Jews didn't repent and turn to God, then God would cut them off and go to the Gentiles.

And if the Gentiles repented and turned to God then God would adopt them as his chosen people; never in the history of the Jewish nation had anybody suggested such an unthinkable thing that they may no longer be members of God's chosen race.

Now the crowds, who clearly understood what John meant, said, "What then should we do". Now John has really got their attention.

Now the people started to reflect on their lives, and their attitude to sin.

Now they are getting worried especially when John added, "Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire", and they knew precisely who he meant.

In reply to the question of what then must they do, John said, 'Those who have clothes or food should share them with those who haven't'.

John is telling them to be merciful to the widows, to the poor to the disabled, indeed to anyone who is in need no matter who or what they are or where they come from, they must start to look after those in need.

Now when the tax collectors asked John what they should do, he said to them, "Collect no more than is prescribed for you.

Tax collecting in those days was very corrupt, because the tax system was basically flawed.

Tax collectors were told how much they had to collect from their area, but nobody else knew how much they had to collect, so collecting more than they should, which of course they kept, was too easy.

But John did not say, 'Stop being a tax collector and get yourself a decent job', No, he said, 'do the job you have but do it as it was meant to be done, stop collecting more than you should'.

And he could have added, "And because your job was given to you by God then you are to do it to the best of your ability, because that is how you, Mr. tax collector, are to worship God.

John replied in the same way to the soldier where it is clear from the reading that soldiers, through their power over life and death, extorted money from people.

John didn't tell them to stop being soldiers, but he did tell them to do the job properly, not to take advantage of their position, not to extort money from people, but be satisfied with their wages; and here again he could have added, because that is how you, as soldiers, are to worship God.

And that basic truth is also true today; as Christians, no matter what our job is in life, we are to do it with integrity and to the best of our ability, because that is how we are also to worship God.

And it makes no difference if you are a nurse, or a soldier, or whether you are paid or unpaid for the work you do, because we are all able to dedicate our work whether paid or voluntary to the glory of God.

From verse 15 the emphasis of the passage changes, the people are now full of expectation following John's declaration that somebody great is coming, and they are questioning in their hearts who John really was, was he in fact the promised Messiah, or was there someone else coming?

But John answered by saying, "I baptise with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals; and he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire", John made it clear that he wasn't the Messiah.

And in the events following our reading St Luke made it very clear that John was talking about Jesus who we know as the Messiah the Son of God our Lord and saviour.

As we sit let us pray,

You came, Lord Jesus Christ, to teach us the way of life that you require, to show us how we are to serve you and our neighbours; make us receptive to your teaching and to your gospel, and help us to live a life of service to you, without counting the cost, to the glory of your name.

Amen

We will now take a few moments for reflection on the sermon, and there are some slips of paper with questions to help us in our reflections.