**Sermon Advent 2 5 December 2021**

**Malachi 3:1-4, Song of Zechariah (APBA p. 10), Philippians 1:1-11, Luke 3:1-6**

How do you remember major events in your life? I wonder if like Luke in our Gospel reading today take major moments in history in order to mark an important date for yourself, or it may be another way of remembering. For Luke, the importance of identifying exactly when John the Baptist began ministering on the river Jordan seems significant. It is not the only time in Luke’s Gospel, that he uses such a device, one that is known as ‘synchronisms’. A synchronism is a ‘chronological arrangement of historical events and personages so as to indicate coincidence or coexistence’. For Luke it is a way of marking co-existence. This occurs at the same time as that. John the Baptist begins a baptism of repentance during the ‘fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberias Ceasar’ which began in August or September BCE 26 or 27. In my mind this is a fairly accurate way of signifying to those listening or reading Luke’s gospel to identify exactly when John began his ministry and to locate forever in time and history.

What stands out is this is not just *one* synchronism. Luke uses a *sixfold* synchronism. A literary way of shouting, look here, there is something very important going on and I need you to pay attention. Luke is pointing to the context in which Jesus ministry will begin. ‘The word of God came to John in the wilderness’ (Lk 3:2).

The word of God came to John. This phrase, ‘the word of God came’ would have been familiar to the religious community in John’s world. It was familiar because the words were written of Jeremiah, from chapter 1:2 ‘to whom the word of Lord came’. Right throughout Jeremiah these words are repeated, ‘The word of the Lord came to me… (Jer 1:4). And the call to Jeremiah was powerful, ‘See today, I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant’ (Jer 1:10). This was not some idle saying, but rather a divine word, God’s power going forth to achieve something in the world.

Just as Jeremiah heard the ‘word of the Lord’ so, says Luke, does John the Baptist. We don’t really know where John grew up. It is quite possible that he may have grown up in Qumran located near the north end of the Dead sea. They lived as a community of priests and of Levitical origin. They separated themselves from others, distinguishing themselves against the worldliness of the Jerusalem hierarchy. They gathered daily for study, for worship, for ritual washings and table fellowship. Josephus, a Jewish historian of the time said of the community that they ‘disdained marriage, but had children by adoption. These they reared in accord with their own principles’. It is quite within the realm of possibility that John may have been raised by them after the death of his parents Zechariah and Elizabeth who were old when Elizabeth gave birth to John (Lk 1:7). There may well be other possibilities too.

In Luke chapter 1, John’s father, Zechariah, a priest of the house of Abijah, was chosen by lot to serve in the Temple. It was customary practice for priests to come and serve at the Temple for a week. When Zechariah entered the Sanctuary to offer incense, the Angel Gabriel stands before Zechariah and states that his son is to be named John and that this child ‘must never drink wine or strong drink’ – a reference that John was to be set aside for God’s work. The Angel tells Zechariah that John would have the ‘spirit and power of Elijah, and would turn the hearts of the people of Israel to the Lord’, (Lk 1:8-17). Priests came to do service in the Temple from the villages around Jerusalem.

We know little of John’s upbringing. But there came a time he left home to preach repentance. If he did live in the Qumran community, John would have left the community, travelling north to go into the wilderness, near to where the Jordan river flows into the dead sea. The wilderness near the river Jordan is a dry, foreboding place. There is little vegetation, except near the river itself. It is here that John begins to preach repentance going into ‘all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins’ (Lk 3:3).

This baptism by John was more than a ritual washing. It was a baptism of repentance. Like the prophets before him, Elijah, Jeremiah and Isaiah, John called those who heard him to repent. The Hebrew word used by the prophets to describe this action was *shub.* It means to ‘turn back’. It means a person heading in the ‘wrong’ direction needs to turn or re-turn. The Greek word which Luke uses for repentance is *metanoia,*  which means literally, a change of mind. Some commentators warn against making too much of this meaning in this context. However it still remains true that the simple act of turning usually and logically follows upon a change of mind. Changing our minds can have a real impact on our everyday behaviour. Think of a behaviour you wanted to change. What did it take to do it? Not just a change of behaviour, but a change in thinking which leads to a change in behaviour. According to John, people were going the wrong way, and so he begins to preach a baptism of repentance.

It’s quite possible that John understood what Isaiah had to say on repentance:

‘Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. Come…though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool’ (Isaiah 1:16-18).

John called those who listened to ‘bear fruits worthy of repentance’ (LK 3:8). Those who had refused to share food and clothing, must do so now. Those who oppressed others, who did not stand up for orphans or widows were now expected to do so. Their very way of living needed to change.

John extended the invitation to everyone. This was not a baptism for an exclusive community – it was to all who came to the river Jordan, to all who would come and repent. Luke takes the words of the prophet Isaiah saying, ‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight”….ending with, “all flesh shall see the salvation of God”’ (Lk 3:3-6, cf Is 40:3-5). John’s baptism was to have universal influence.

John’s baptism of repentance was a prophetic, symbolic act. It was not only to bring people to repentance and therefore the forgiveness of sins. It had a much greater significance The waters of the Jordan were symbolic. They had been the gateway to the promised land, both for the people of the Exodus and for those who had returned from the Babylonian exile. Now it would guide people toward the ‘one who is greater than I’, to lead them to Jesus, the Messiah, the anointed one of God. They would experience the salvation of God. John’s baptism pathed the way for the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Today, we may not grasp the significance of John the Baptist’s claim that the word of the Lord came to him. What Luke does for us, is to invite us into John the Baptist’s world, where this baptism of repentance lead to the forgiveness of sins. It leads us to a place of *metanoia,* where our minds (and hearts) can be turned around, so that we can allow God’s spirit to be at work in us and for us.

May we this Advent season grasp what true repentance looks like. It is not just saying sorry and going on our merry way to do again what we said sorry for. No, it is changing our minds and our hearts to amend our lives, to seek after God, to live a holy life in all things. May we bring to God today the things we need to put right with God and in so doing with our neighbour too.