

Sermon Series:

# Who is this man?

Jesus' early ministry (Luke 3-9)

## TRUE REPENTANCE – Luke 3:1-20; Isaiah 58:1-9

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Back in November and December last year, in the lead up to Christmas, we began our look at the Gospel of Luke, starting with the birth accounts in chapters one and two. We're now going to pick up this series again and look at the next two sections of Luke. In chapters three and the beginning of chapter four, we'll see God's preparation for Jesus' ministry.

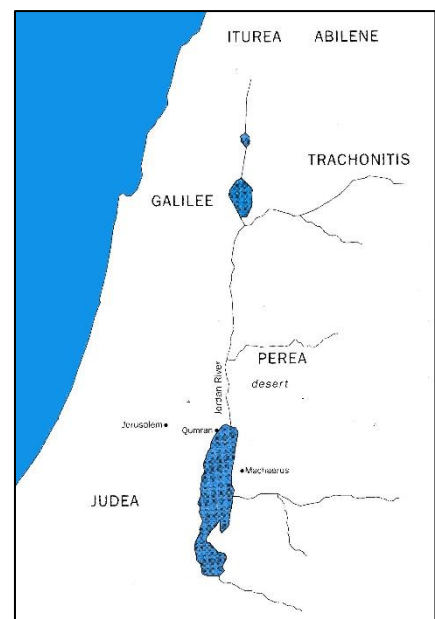
Luke then skips over about a year of Jesus' early ministry and tells us about a year and half in the middle of His public ministry which occurred in the region of Galilee where he grew up. During this time, His focus was on the ordinary people in this rural area – people like you and me. Over and over again during this time, people ask, "Who is this man?" As we look at Jesus through Luke's eyes, I hope we'll get a clearer picture of Him and what that means for us.

### The context of John the Baptist

In the first two chapters of Luke, he alternates between the stories of Jesus and John the Baptist. We see both sets of parents being visited by an angel to announce their births, we have an account of those births, and finally short insights into their growth and development before their public ministry. It is clear in these accounts that, while John is important, Jesus is the main character. As we start this new section of the Gospel, Luke goes back to John the Baptist to look at his role in preparing the way for Jesus. To do this, Luke is careful to place John in his historical and Biblical context.

#### 1. Historical context

The reading starts with a list of names and places which were very familiar to his initial readers. First, he lists the Roman rulers who were in charge at the time. Through these, if we look at Roman records of this time, we can work out pretty closely when this happened. After mentioning the ruler of all the Roman Empire, Tiberius



Cesar, he goes on to list the local rulers. First, he mentions two people who will have a part to play in Jesus' story: Pontius Pilate who ruled over Judea; and Herod who was in Galilee. Then he mentions two more who do not come into the Biblical account: Philip who ruled in Iturea and Trachonitis; and Lysanius who was in Abilene.

Finally, Luke mentions the Jewish religious leaders who also carried a lot of political power. Annas had retired as High Priest, but he was still very powerful. Caiaphas was the current High Priest. Both of these will play major parts in the story of Jesus and the early church.

## 2. Biblical context

When John was born, Zechariah prophesied about his future:

*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,  
to give his people the knowledge of salvation  
through the forgiveness of their sins ... (1:76,77)*

John would be a prophet, carrying on the work and message of the prophets of the Old Testament. He would have two purposes: to go before the Messiah and announce His coming and to prepare the people for God's salvation by calling them to repent from their sins.

Luke picks up these things again as he introduces the adult John. His ministry begins like that of many of the Old Testament prophets: *"the word of the God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness"*. (v. 2) John was called by God and his words would have the authority of God.

Luke goes on to say that John is the fulfillment of a prophecy given by Isaiah:

*A voice of one calling in the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. (v. 4)*

He is not talking about a holy public works project! No, he is talking figuratively about calling people to deal with the sin which comes between them and God – to smooth out the obstacles which come between them and God. And in doing so, they will be prepared for God's Messiah who would come to save them. Luke goes on to present a snapshot of John's ministry to show how He accomplished these two purposes.

### **A baptism of repentance**

As the crowds come down to the Jordan River on the edge of the wilderness, John doesn't hold back on warning them of their problem.

*"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?" (v. 7)*

I'm guessing he didn't win any Mr Congeniality awards! But before they could solve their problem, they needed to know there was one. They needed to be shocked into looking at their lives with fresh eyes. Judgement was coming and if they didn't change, they would be in trouble.

They objected, "But we're Abraham's children, members of the chosen people, under the covenant". John replied, as did the prophets before him, that one's status as a Jew doesn't

mean anything if it is not joined to a willingness to actually live the way God called the Jews to live. You can't be complacent, resting on who you are by birth.

But John doesn't just condemn them and walk away. He offers a solution – repentance – owning up to what they have done and doing something about it. Repentance isn't just about feeling guilty or sorry for what you have done. True repentance is the decision to turn away from your current behaviour and make a conscious choice to live another way. It is to make a U-turn in your life, turning away from sin and to God.

We saw this in our passage from Isaiah this morning. Isaiah was talking to some people who were fasting and even humbling themselves before God, but not changing the way they lived. Through him, God says:

*Is this the kind of fast I have chosen,  
only a day for people to humble themselves?*

*Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed  
and for lying in sackcloth and ashes?*

*Is that what you call a fast,  
a day acceptable to the Lord?*

*Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:  
to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke,  
to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?*

*Is it not to share your food with the hungry  
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—  
when you see the naked, to clothe them,  
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? (Isaiah 58:5-7)*

In Isaiah's time, as in John's, (and ours!) it is easy to feel sorry for one's bad behaviour. It is another matter to actually make changes in one's behaviour. John calls this change of behaviour the "fruit" of their repentance.

John's words finally got their attention! And their next question was a natural one: "*What should we do then?*" (v. 10) John gives them examples of how their repentance should show itself in everyday righteous living – things anyone could understand and do. Righteous living involves compassion towards others. He didn't ask them to give away their only shirt, or go hungry themselves, but to share what they did have with others. He didn't ask the tax collectors and soldiers to find new jobs, but to show integrity in how they did their jobs and to use their power carefully. And to be content and not contentious when it came to their income. These were practical ways to show that you are aligning your life with God's character and standards. These are evidence of a life that has taken a repentant U-turn.

### **The one who will come**

John's message had a deep impact on those who heard him. They recognised the importance of John and his message, to the point of wondering if he himself was the Messiah. But John was quick to point them away from him and to the one for whom he was preparing the way. He said,

*“... one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.” (v. 16)*

The one coming after him would be exponentially greater in his person, but he will also be greater in his work.

*“I baptize you in water ... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (v. 16)*

There are different interpretations of what is meant here, but I think if we look at what is said in this passage and similar Old Testament prophecies, a couple of things are clear. Firstly, the Holy Spirit renews our heart. Through the prophet Ezekiel, God promises that when the Messiah comes:

*I will give you a new heart and put a new Spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. (Ezekiel 36:26-27)*

We can want to do what is right, but our old desires and habits will always pull us back to our old behaviour. The Holy Spirit is able to change our heart and move us to do what is right. He causes us to desire to change and gives us the ability to do so. When the Holy Spirit is involved, it is not just about our own, often transitory desires to do better, it is about the power of God to change lives.

Secondly, “fire” refers to purification. God, speaking through the prophet Malachi said:

*“I will send my messenger, (that’s John!) who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking (that’s Jesus!) will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the Lord Almighty. “But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap.” (Malachi 3:1-2)*

He goes on to talk about how this will be like refining silver to remove all the impurities. I think this can be applied on two levels. Individuals are purified as they receive forgiveness through belief in Christ. But I also think that there is also a purification of God’s people which happens as God removes those who do not repent so that only those who are truly His remain. This passage uses two farming illustrations that indicate this. The tree that has no fruit (the fruit of repentance) is cut down and thrown into the fire. The wheat kernel is separated from the chaff with the kernel saved, but the chaff burned up. This is a warning to those who do not repent and good news for those who do!

### **The context of our lives**

John the Baptist’s ministry had a big impact on the people of Israel before the coming of Jesus. But we are on the other side of the cross. Does John have anything to say to us? I think he does, but we have to think carefully about it.

Before Jesus, John offered a baptism of repentance which was a way for people to declare to all that they wanted to live differently. It was a serious step to take because was an admission that you were sinful and that you were committing yourself to make significant changes to your life in order to live righteously. People would be watching to see if you followed through on your intentions! But John was clear that his baptism was not an end in

itself. He was preparing people for what was next – the ministry of one who would bring the Holy Spirit and purify His people. Even John himself did not know how this would happen, he just knew that someone greater was coming. John's baptism of repentance was just the first step in the process for those living in Jesus' day.

Today, we look back at this from the other side of the cross. This changes things for us. Through what we read in the Bible, we can understand what Jesus did and how He works in our lives to purify us and bring change in our lives through the indwelling Holy Spirit. We understand the difference Jesus makes. However, we still enter this new relationship with God through repentance.

On the day of Pentecost, as Peter was speaking to the crowds we read:

*Peter replied, "Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:38)*

We still have to turn away from our old sinful life and choose to turn to Christ and accept His salvation. We still have to make the U-turn of repentance. When we enter into this new relationship with God through Christ, we become part of His family, filled with His Spirit who gives us a new heart and new desires to follow God. And Christ cleanses us and slowly, over time, changes us to be like Him.

For Christians today, baptism means something different than John's baptism did. His baptism was something unique for that time in history, a preparation for the coming of Jesus. Today, our baptism is not so much about repentance as about belonging in the family of God. There are two different understandings of baptism you will find in the church. I think both have their strengths and weaknesses.

Here in the Uniting Church, we mainly practice infant baptism. Children of believing parents are baptised to signify that they belong to the community of God's people. This is considered to be similar to circumcision for the Jews. Obviously, an infant can't repent, so this is not about becoming a Christian, but about becoming a part of a community of people centred around Christ. When a person is older, they can go through what is called confirmation where they have the opportunity to personally "confirm" their choice to follow God. For many, this includes a significant time of repentance as they make a definite choice to turn from their sin and follow God. For others, this choice may happen more informally as God works in their life over time. The idea is, however, that the process of confirmation is the time when they choose for themselves to follow God.

Other churches, like the Baptists, practice believer's baptism. These people believe that because infants cannot repent and make a conscious decision to follow Christ, then they should not be baptised. For them, baptism is the outward sign of the inward union with Christ's death and resurrection which has happened as they have believed in the salvation found in Christ. This kind of baptism usually involves full immersion with its symbolism of going under the water – dying with Christ to their sins - and coming up again – rising with Christ into newness of life. In these churches, infants of believing parents are often dedicated to God and the church welcomes them into the community and commits to nurturing their relationship with God, but this is considered to be different to baptism.

Personally, I think the timing of baptism is less important than the choice of the person to turn from their sins and turn to God in faith, believing that Jesus has died for their sins and risen again to give them new life. I've been baptised twice! My father was a pastor in a Presbyterian church when I was born and so I was baptised as an infant. This was a meaningful occasion for them and the church but didn't mean much to me as I grew up. We later moved to a Baptist church and after I had personally made the choice to follow Christ I was baptised as a public profession of my faith in Christ. I was then welcomed into the membership of the church. This was very meaningful time for me and the church and an important part of developing my own relationship with God and finding my place in His church. In this way, it was similar to confirmation for those who have been baptised as infants.

These two approaches see baptism as meaning something different in the life of a Christian. Both understandings can be meaningful and important steps in a person's relationship with God. It is also true that both approaches can be mere ritual. Certainly, baptism alone, either in infancy or as a personal profession of faith, does not save someone if repentance, faith and new birth do not occur. I'd encourage you to think about the place that baptism, repentance, faith and membership of the church hold in your own life. Is there a new step you need to take? How are you manifesting true repentance in your life? If you'd like to think about this further, I'd love to talk with you.