

A Voice of one Calling in the Wilderness.

Matthew 3:1-12

*A highway will be there;
it will be called the Way of Holiness.
The unclean will not journey on it; it will be for those who
walk in that Way .. only the redeemed will walk there,
and the ransomed of the LORD will return.
They will enter Zion with singing ...
(Isaiah 35:8-10)*

Before Matthew describes the ministry of Jesus, John the Baptist comes, because John is a herald to Jesus, announcing his coming and telling us to prepare his way into our lives.

Matthew brings John on the scene as mysteriously as Elijah appeared 800 years before, without mention of father or mother. (1 Kings 17:1) And, like Elijah, he is God's man. But he comes to announce God's loving mercy, as well as his imminent judgement. ***"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."*** God had promised to send such a messenger. "I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come ... But who can endure the day of his coming? ... I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. ..." (Malachi 3:1-2; 4:5)

So, it is no wonder that John comes in the same humble clothing as Elijah wore (2 Kgs 1:8) and ate the food, wild honey and dried locusts, available to him in the desert where he was living (Luke 1:80). He knew himself to be a forerunner and announcer of the coming of the King of kings, yet whose sandals he was not fit to undo or carry, so ***he regarded himself as just "A voice of one calling in the wilderness."***

The wilderness or desert. The best place to meet with God. The place without distractions or other voices. A place to humble oneself, as God humbled his rebellious people for 40 years. A place to hear God speaking, as he did to Moses, to David and to others. And where Jesus went to pray, first thing in the morning.

How can we prepare the way of the Lord?

"Prepare the way for the Lord!" ***What hinders the Lord's coming into our lives?*** John tells us, "Repent!" This means, "Turn right round and go God's way!" By nature, we are rebels – ***we want to go our own way***, make our own choices in life. But

God's way, **his** way to come into our life to bless us, **begins with our surrender to him**, our Creator and King.

It has always been this way. When God called Abraham, he had to leave his father's house and go to a country that **God** would show him. God gave Isaiah a vision of himself, God, in his glory and holiness, so that Isaiah saw himself as unclean, unfit to be in God's presence. But God was calling Isaiah to be his prophet. And so it is, with each of us – **we need to see ourselves as sinners**, needing God's forgiveness, before he can bless us or use us.

When John the Baptist preached about the coming kingdom of God, people came from far around to hear him. But that message included God's judgement on their sins. John put this into simple language for country-folk, to make it vivid. It was **a picture of harvest**, when the farmer separates the good grain from the unwanted husks or chaff. "His winnowing fork is in his hand, and **he will clear his threshing-floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff** with unquenchable fire." Many of those who heard John, recognised **they were unfit** for God's kingdom. They confessed their sins and were baptised by John in the river Jordan. They were **asking God to wash away their sins, to forgive them**, and prepare them for his kingdom.

Washing, in order to be right with God, who is holy and pure, was not a new idea. Do you know the story of the Syrian general Naaman (2 Kings 5)? "He was a valiant soldier, but he had the horrible disease of leprosy." His wife had a young servant-girl taken captive from Israel, who said to her mistress, "If only my master would see the prophet (Elisha) who is in Samaria! He would cure him!"

To cut a long story short, Naaman arrives at the prophet's door, only for Elisha's servant to come out, and tell him to go and wash seven times in the Jordan. Naaman is furious, but his servants said, "My father, if he had told you to do some great thing, wouldn't you have done it? Why not do it when he tells you to 'Wash and be made clean?' So Naaman humbled himself and

washed seven times in the Jordan, as Elisha had told to do. And **he was healed**, so that his flesh was restored like that of a young boy.

In John's day, those who were **not Jews**, but wanting to become members of God's people, were required to wash themselves ceremonially in a bath – and all of their family. Men and boys had to be circumcised. And a sacrifice was offered. Then they all became part of God's chosen people. But **now, shockingly**, John the Baptist was requiring **of repentant Jews**, that **they** should be baptised! Moreover, they were not to wash themselves, but they were to be immersed by John himself! – in a flowing river!

This new thing, and God's message through John, drew the attention of the religious authorities in Jerusalem. When a delegation of them came to see what John was doing (a mere layman, as they thought), he denied that he was the Messiah – or even Elijah (whom, literally, he was *not*). (John 1:10-28) He was just **a voice of one calling**, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'

But **he had straight words for them** as well. "Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? **Produce fruit in keeping with repentance**. Do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father?'" For they were relying on their **being** Jews, circumcised on the eighth day after birth, and not having broken, outwardly, the laws of God, like the 10 Commandments.

Application to ourselves.

How much do **we**, as a church, honour God in **our** worship and in **our** lives? Is **he** our **first priority**, or have we put **other** activities, **other** loyalties first? In the Old Testament that was called idolatry – worshipping a substitute **instead of God**. Do we think **we** are better? John spoke about Jesus, "I baptise you with water with a view to repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." Do **we** think of Jesus in this way? Do we **love and worship him**? Are we **eager**

to come to church **every Sunday** to do just that? And do our **everyday** lives **show** that we love and serve Jesus?

Some of the Jews who came to John the Baptist said, "We have Abraham as our father." **What's the equivalent** of that **for us**? Are we relying on having been brought up in a Christian country? Were you baptised as an infant? Did that make you a Christian? Were your parents Christians? Does that make you a Christian now?

You know it does not, for the same could be said of many who have now turned away from belief in Jesus as Lord and Saviour, and live their lives as they please. You know that **it is a matter of the heart, and not just a belief in your head, or something done to you externally!**

That kind of religion, which John spoke against, means trusting in our religious **activity** rather than trusting in **God**. It is putting our confidence that we are right with God in our **practice** rather than trusting the **person** of our Lord Jesus. We **love** what **we do** or have done, instead of **loving Jesus!**

And that is being **complacent**, a recipe for lukewarmness. Do you know what the risen Lord said, in the vision he gave John about the church at Laodicea? (Rev 3:16) He said, **"You are lukewarm. I will spit you out of my mouth."** Why was Jesus disgusted with that church? They had become worldly and self-sufficient, thinking **they** no longer needed to seek the grace and forgiveness of God. **Are we** in danger of being **complacent**? Are we like the Laodiceans, "wretched, pitiful, blind and naked"?

Jesus said to them, "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. **So be earnest and repent**. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. **If anyone** hears my voice and **opens the door**, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me." (Rev 3:19-20)

Have you opened the door into your heart and life, asking him to be your Saviour and Lord? We must ask Jesus to be

both Saviour and Lord, genuinely from the heart! Remember his love for you, his dying for you, that you might be forgiven!

Yes, you may tell me, I have done that. **What do we do then, when we fall into sin**, and God, speaking through our consciences, convicts us of wrong-doing? Do we straightaway ask the Lord for forgiveness, through his blood shed for us? Do we repent, turn away, from all thought of doing the same sin again? And do our lives reveal this repentance by **a real change** in our behaviour?! John the Baptist had very practical things to say about that! (Luke 3:10-14)

It may be that our sins are not seen by others – **although they are by God** – but God very graciously forgives us if we truly come to him in this way. And, as he tells **us** to do, when **others offend us, - he forgives us again and again**, when we come to him in genuine sorrow and repentance. "Whoever comes to me", said Jesus, "I will never drive away." (John 6:37)

I conclude with the words the Lord spoke to Solomon in a vision he was given, after dedicating the temple of God: **"If my people**, who are called by my name, **will humble themselves** and pray and **seek my face and turn from their wicked ways**, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land." (2 Chron 7:14)