

## *SERMON ~ BIBLE READING: LUKE 3:1-20; ISAIAH 40:1-11*

Last week we found Zechariah bursting into song – a song that spells out how the birth of his son John relates to the birth of the promised Saviour, a song that makes clear that his son John will be the forerunner of the Messiah, the messenger who will go on ahead to clear the way for the Anointed King, to herald his arrival and to get the people ready for his move into the neighbourhood. And the John we're talking about here? John the Baptist.

We might have expected the forerunner's message to be about a transition in the theology of the Jewish people or even a reformation of their religious ritual. But it was more radical than that – it called for a fundamental change of lifestyle.

'Prove by the way you live' says John, 'that you have really turned from your sins and turned to God.' In other words, John is on about a complete turnaround. Paul frequently describes this complete turnaround in his letters, but notably in his second letter to the Christians in Corinthian where he writes: "Anyone who belongs to Christ is a new person. The past is forgotten, and everything is new." It is the experience Jesus describes as 'being born again' or 'born from above'.

Sometimes we can a bit confused about the idea of repentance, but at its simplest it's a change of mind – a change of mind that is prompted by the Holy Spirit, a change of mind that produces the desire for a change in lifestyle, a change of lifestyle that is enabled by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit's role is key; and the Bible uses interchangeably the terms 'born of God' and 'born of the Spirit'.

Impressed by the austere self-disciplined lifestyle of John the Baptist – 'John's clothes were woven from coarse camel hair, and he wore a leather belt around his waist. He lived on a diet of locusts and wild honey' – impressed by that self-denying lifestyle we might be tempted to think that that's what conversion is all about – submitting to rigorous rules and renouncing material comfort. But it is not a 'hair-shirt' mentality or a ritualised repentance that is the key to the kingdom of God; it is rather the centrality of the Holy Spirit.

It is the Holy Spirit, called by Jesus the Counsellor, who first reveals to us the truth about ourselves – we are lost without Jesus. But not only does the Holy Spirit reveal to us just how lost we are without Jesus, but he also draws us to Jesus and provides the supernatural power – in fact, nothing less than the power which God used to raise Jesus from death and exalt him to his right side in the heavenly world – and provides the supernatural power by which we can turn away from sin and set out on a Christ-centred lifestyle.

## *FOUR FOR THOUGHT*

1. ‘Our confidence in Christ does not make us lazy, negligent, or careless, but on the contrary it awakens us, urges us on, and makes us active in living righteous lives and doing good.’ (Ulrich Zwingli, former Catholic priest and preacher and one of the leaders of the Reformation in Switzerland)
2. ‘When the Spirit came at Pentecost, it wasn’t dynamite – it was a dynamo! Dynamite makes a loud noise, kicks up a lot of dust, and it’s over. A dynamo is a continual source of power.’ (Ken Hutcherson, *The Church - what we are meant to be*)
3. ‘Grace is power as well as pardon.’ (Gabriel Fackre)

## *GOING DEEPER*

Questions on the Bible passage and sermon for you to think about during the week, either on your own or in a small group:

1. How can we tell people about God’s judgement (Luke 3:7) without sounding as outdated as the sandwich-board preacher with his posters about the end of the world?
2. In a world where science and technology extend life, is it appropriate to warn people about the transience of life (Isaiah 40:6-8)?
3. Does the church have a role in publicly criticising the moral decisions of our leaders (Luke 3:19) or should Christians keep out of politics?