

1 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Tracoonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene— **2** during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. **3** He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. **4** As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

“A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.

5 Every valley shall be filled in,
every mountain and hill made low.
The crooked roads shall become straight,
the rough ways smooth.

6 And all people will see God’s salvation.”

7 John said to the crowds coming out to be baptised by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? **8** Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. **9** The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

10 “What should we do then?” the crowd asked.

11 John answered, “Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.”

12 Even tax collectors came to be baptised. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?”

13 “Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” he told them.

14 Then some soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?”

He replied, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.”

15 The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. **16** John answered them all, “I baptise you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

17 His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” **18** And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.

Principle reason why Luke and not another passage in the Bible is that I’m bothered by the danger of mythologising the gospel. What do I mean?

You might hear that the gospel is about peace - and it is about peace - but then you might invert that and start to think that anything called ‘peace’ is actually the gospel. Or

you might do the same with love. The gospel is about love - but everything called love is not the gospel.

If we just hear the stories - but if we take a good idea out of the story and then forget the story we're doing a horrible disservice to Jesus. If God wanted to teach us in the form of ideas, then he could have given us a book of systematic theology - all our questions answered.

Instead of a book of questions and answers, God sent His Son to live and die as a human. A real human who got dirty, hungry and tired. A human who had to learn, to grow and to suffer with us.

Ultimately God sent Jesus because he wants you and me to be in a personal relationship with him.

You can't have a relationship with an inanimate object or an idea. You can have a real relationship with God because he is personal - and by sending Jesus - God was inviting each and every one of us to have a relationship with him PERSONALLY.

John says the reason he wrote was that we might find life in Jesus name. Matthew is written to show how Jesus is the fulfilment - the focus of the entire Tanak - what we call the 'old testament'.

Luke, on the other hand, says very specifically that he has written his text so that his wealthy sponsor - Theophilus - can have an orderly account of Jesus life.

Everyone who writes history has a particular lens through which they see things - and we are no different - but Luke is committed to helping Theophilus - and now us - to see, to discover the person of Jesus - the Man who is God.

All that is to say that when Luke begins this story about John the Baptist, it is totally in keeping with his vision of a coherent orderly account that he fixes his story in a particular historical context. No-one can be confused about where or when he is referring to when he starts 'in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius...'

Rather than saying in October 2017 I moved here - it'd be like someone writing 'in the last year when Bill English was prime minister and Jonathan Coleman was MP for Northcote, Dan Tyler came from the UK to BCC to work as the pastor.

You can't call this a legend

Now, as a literary historian, I am perfectly convinced that whatever else the Gospels are they are not legends. I have read a great deal of legend and I am quite clear that

they are not the same sort of thing. They are not artistic enough to be legends. From an imaginative point of view they are clumsy, they don't work up to things properly. Most of the life of Jesus is totally unknown to us, as is the life of anyone else who lived at that time, and no people building up a legend would allow that to be so. Apart from bits of the Platonic dialogues, there is no conversation that I know of in ancient literature like the Fourth Gospel. There is nothing, even in modern literature, until about a hundred years ago when the realistic novel came into existence.

Whatever else people might like to say about the gospels - about Luke's gospel - it is crystal clear that Luke believed everything that he wrote about actually happened at a real point in history.

So Luke fixes his story in a real point in history - but then he doesn't start with Jesus.

Luke starts with an eccentric prophet wandering in the wilderness across the river from the main city. Elsewhere we can find that John the Baptist is Jesus' cousin. He is also wearing strange clothes, eating a strange diet of insects and honey and in many ways reminding the people about the prophets they've read about.

The fact that Luke starts this story with John should make us stop. What is it that John was doing - and why is it important to hear John before you can meet Jesus?

What's John doing? In verse 3 you can see he is going around the region telling people to get baptised - that's where the name John the Baptist comes from - telling them to get baptised and telling them to repent for the forgiveness of sins.

We'll look at a little bit of the detail of the repentance in a moment but first it's important to realise both how offensive this message would have been to John's followers - and if we hear it today - how offensive it will be for us.

Luke is telling us that if you want to see Jesus - if you want to meet Jesus and have a relationship with God through him then your starting point is repentance.

Now baptism is not a Christian invention - the Jews were baptising people long before Jesus turned up. Because the Jewish nation was formed by the event known as the Exodus, the Jews knew themselves to be a people who had been baptised - gone through the waters. If someone wanted to become a Jew - and very few did - if a man wanted to become a Jew they had to get circumcised and then get baptised before offering a sacrifice. It was how the person coming into the community identified with the Jewish people. Get circumcised like Abraham and get baptised like Moses - then you can be a real Jew.

Now you know that I'm British - applying for permanent residency here but my passport is definitely British. If you want to become a British Citizen, then you have to pass certain criteria - including passing an exam.

I'll give you a couple of examples of the questions:

- Who wrote the poem "She Walks in Beauty"? (Lord Byron)
- What was the main rival party to the Tories in the 1700s parliament? (Whigs)
- Who was voted the greatest Briton in a public poll in 2002? (Churchill)
- Who was Henry the 8th's fifth wife? (Catherine Howard)

I'm going to tell you straight up that if you went up to a stranger on the streets of Leeds, the chance that they would get these right is next to zero.

If you told them that because they got the questions wrong that they had to reapply for citizenship they would get angry, offended and you might even start a fight.

John the Baptist is doing something similar - but much more offensive. He tells these law-abiding, racially pure Jews that they are no longer proper Jews unless they submit themselves to the same ceremony as the foreigners.

If John was speaking in New Zealand in 2019 he would be saying much the same if we invited him to preach here. He would be saying that Jesus is far greater than he will ever be - far greater than any of us will ever know.

But he would even be telling the Christians in New Zealand - you're going to miss Jesus if you don't start with repentance.

I believe that's why Luke starts the story of Jesus ministry with this rather odd episode. Luke is saying that if you don't start with repentance then you will miss Jesus. In fact if you don't start with repentance you will end up as a critic of Jesus not a follower.

I wonder how many of us would have been critics not disciples of Jesus if we were there 2000 years ago. I'm, by nature, quite a questioning, doubtful, cynical person. I wonder if Jesus would have counted me among his followers or his cynical critics.

Jesus is not looking for more people who can write books about him. Jesus is not looking for more people who can pass theology exams. Jesus is not even looking for more people to work for him.

Jesus is looking for people to follow him.

It's the church workers, the theologians and the vicars that John is most angry with in verse 7

*“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? **8** Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. **9** The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”*

What is John saying?

Do not begin to say to yourselves ‘I know the Bible’, ‘I was brought up in church’, even ‘I’m a leader in the church’. God doesn’t need helpers He calls us to follow Jesus.

What does God want from us? The fruit of repentance. In fact, John says, the person who doesn’t produce the fruit of repentance better be prepared to be cut down and thrown into the fire.

You can sense a bit of the tension in the original sermon that Luke is recording for us. The crowd ask: what should we do? There’s a bit of fear. There’s a bit of frustration possibly. There’s a bit of disbelief probably.

What should we do to get ready for Jesus - to make the paths straight for him in our lives - what should we do? John gives three different answers.

1. To the crowd he says we should share and give to the poor.
2. To the tax collectors - he says they should do their job honestly and cease the practice of skimming off more tax than they need to take to line their own pockets. Even when everyone else is, they should not be greedy.
3. To the soldiers John says don’t use your power to hurt people and make yourself rich.

Here’s where the rubber hits the road for us today. If we want to see Jesus, to journey with Jesus - even to know Jesus this year then the first thing we need to do is to produce the fruits that are in keeping with our repentance.

That means if you have power using it for the benefit of other people

That means if you have possessions, using them, giving them away, to the benefit of other people

That means if you have money being sure to use it for something other than your own comfort and convenience.

I have had a lot of conversations with people where they tell me that they feel far away from God. Most of us can recall some time when we were younger, when we had fewer responsibilities and less power - and often it was in those times that we met Jesus personally.

John the Baptist is saying to us today that if we want to walk through 2019 with Jesus then we need to reassess how we're using our power, money and possessions. Are we using them simply for our own benefit or are we using them first and foremost for the benefit of other people who need help?

I don't know about you but this passage is striking and very challenging to me. Most of my money, power and possessions are organised to make my life comfortable - and to make the lives of my immediate family as comfortable and enjoyable as possible. It is also true that I feel less close to God than I did when I was a poor university student 15 years ago. I sometimes wonder if I've traded in a relationship with Jesus for a comfortable life - or at least hedged my bets 50:50.

If we want to know freedom and peace with Jesus. If we want to know purpose and the power of the spirit. If we want to become the people that God has made us to be then I suggest that John the Baptist has something to teach us. Peace, freedom, purpose, power - they all come from a life of repentance.

We start by saying - God I give you control again - especially of the things I've taken back over the years. And, although it's a painful experience, God will set us free from being controlled by the things of this world.

He will - as John says in verse 16 - baptise us with the Holy Spirit and with fire. The fire will burn away the things that are holding us captive and the Holy Spirit will bring us into the freedom, purpose and grace of God.

It's always struck me as odd that this passage ends with the line: and with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.

The business of repent or burn doesn't seem like good news at first. But as it happens, the things that we need to turn away from - because that's what repentance means: turning away - the things that we need to turn away from are the things that are killing us.

Turn away from selfishness - and live for others. Selfishness is rotting our souls.
Turn away from greed and live a life of generosity. Greed is breaking our society.
Turn away from power and live a life for the weak. Chasing power is like chasing gold at the end of the rainbow - you end up wet, muddy and exhausted - and weaker for the experience.

The good news is that we can turn away from the sin in our life. We can repent - ask God to help us to turn away from sin - and because Jesus lived a life free from sin he can set us free from the evil. Because he died a death to pay for our sin we are set free from the judgement of sin. Because Jesus rose again to conquer death we are free to face tomorrow with hope in our hearts.

The good news is that we CAN turn from our sin. Because of the guy who came after John the Baptist. Because He will announce his ministry as one which set the captive free, proclaimed good news to the poor, declared healing to the blind and freedom to the oppressed.

The good news is an end to the slavery of sin. It's a slavery that is broken by the life, death and resurrection of the Son of God. The end of the reign of sin is what we celebrate at the communion table.

As we eat the bread we are uniting ourselves with Jesus - the only one who was never held in slavery to sin. As we drink the grape juice we are reminding ourselves of the freedom that we have from sin - a freedom that cost Jesus his life but means life to us.

The reason I love passing the offering bags round after communion is that it's a reminder that our repentance - our turning to Jesus is never just a head-thing. It's a deeply practical thing.

So as the offering bag comes to you today I wonder if you could pause a moment and consider what it is that you want to confess to Jesus that you have taken out of his control in your life and maybe offer up a prayer of dedication - that you will dedicate that part of your life to serving his vision again this year.

Let's pray.

Jonathan Edwards

O sinner, consider the fearful danger you are in! It is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of the wrath that you are held over in the hand of that God whose wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you as against many of the damned in hell. You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder; and you have no interest in any Mediator, and nothing to lay hold of to save yourself, nothing to keep off the flames of wrath, nothing of your own, nothing that you have done, nothing that you can do, to induce God to spare you one moment.

Now, undoubtedly it is, as it was in the days of John the Baptist, the axe is laid at the root of the trees, and every tree which brings not forth good fruit, may be hewn down, and cast into the fire.

Two things John requires: Baptism and Repentance. They're linked but they're not the same. Baptism is a one-time thing. Repentance is a permanent state - a settled position.

You don't grow fruit by repotting the fruit plants every few days. You grow fruit in a settled state. Repentance - producing the fruit of repentance happens when you are in a settled state of repentance.