

Luke 3:15-17 & 21-22

The baptism of Jesus.

The appearance of John the Baptist in the wilderness caused quite a stir of excitement and marked a significant turning point in the history of God's people. This resulted in many of the Jews, going out into the desert to find out what all the fuss was about. According to Matthew this also included many of the religious leaders.

It is easy to understand the crowd's anticipation, as they had felt for a long time that God had abandoned them. You can sense their palpable relief that after over 500 years of silence, finally God had sent a messenger to them. This resulted in a renewed sense of hope that God would once again deliver them from oppression.

The burning question on everybody's lips was, who was John the Baptist? Was **he** the long-awaited Messiah, or were they to expect someone else? John was quick to play down the crowd's expectations. He was very clear about the role that he had been sent to perform. He told them that himself was not the Messiah but had been given the task of preparing the way for the imminent arrival of the Messiah. He taught the people that they would recognise the Messiah, when he came, by the fact that he was far superior to him and would baptise them not with water but with God's power, the power of the Holy Spirit.

John's preaching was considered quite controversial, by the crowd, as he drew attention to the failures of the people to live by the standards that God expected of them. He warned them that coming of the Messiah would not be the blessing that they anticipated but would bring about judgement for their failures.

Clearly the people had become complacent, considering that they were acceptable to God simply because they were descendants of Abraham. So, John warned them quite clearly of their need to turn back to God and to prove that they were his people by the way that they lived their lives. John's preaching had quite an impact and resulted in many of the people being baptised as a sign of their renewed desire to follow God.

The baptism of Jesus, by John in the river Jordan, proved to be another very special moment and marked the start of Jesus public ministry, but Luke does not go into great details about what actually took place. He simply describes it in, a matter-of-fact way, in a couple of verses. He focuses on the coming of the Holy Spirit in terms of a dove descending upon Jesus and he recalls the voice from heaven, affirming that Jesus was God's beloved son in whom he is well pleased.

In all that was to follow during the next three years, Jesus relied upon the guidance and help of the Holy Spirit to enable him to accomplish God's plan for his life. Jesus is an example of what can be achieved by a man who is truly full of the Holy Spirit. When he encountered opposition, he must have drawn immense strength and reassurance to remain committed to doing God's will from hearing his father's unequivocal affirmation.

For us today, the baptism of Jesus is significant for two reasons. Firstly, we see for the first time in history the Holy Spirit coming down, resting and remaining on someone paving the way for us to receive the same transforming infilling of God's power. And secondly, because of the voice from heaven affirming that Jesus was God's son. The assurance that they are loved unconditionally is just what many people today need to hear for themselves.

Today the churches' role, our role, could be compared to the role of John the Baptist. We are called to prepare people for the second coming of the Messiah. One day Jesus will return for his bride, the church, and first and foremost he expects us to be spotless. He is calling us to a new and deeper level of holiness, both individually and corporately.

So, we must, ask ourselves and I include myself, because I am fully aware that God still has a lot of refining work to do within me, where have we become complacent, tolerant of our shortcomings? We cannot make excuses for our failures. The role of the Holy Spirit is to draw to our attention any areas where lives do not match up to God's standard, in order that we can confess them and ask for the help of the Holy Spirit to change, so that we become more like Jesus.

We cannot simply cover up our failures, brush them under the carpet and hope that we will get away with them. Our all seeing, all knowing, God will bring them to light. Matthew 10: 26 says: "there is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known".¹ Peter 4:17 says, For it is time for judgment to begin with God's household; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?

Sadly, I believe we have recently seen an example of the way that God reveals what we seek to hide, in the way that the Archbishop of Canterbury has been forced to resign because of the churches historic failure to deal appropriately with and the subsequent cover up of the sexual abuse of John Smyth.

We have nothing to be afraid of, when God exposes our past failures. He is not wishing to condemn us. He exposes our weakness in order that we can

say sorry, find forgiveness and be set free from guilt and shame and live as good ambassadors for him.

We also have a role to play in warning people of the coming judgement. God will not tolerate evil forever. In recent years we've tended to focus on the grace of God and that's right but we failed to teach appropriately about the day of judgement. On the cross Jesus defeated the powers of evil, consequently, satan's days are numbered. We live in a society where many are ignorant of the way that God expects them to live and unaware of his coming judgement of them, unless they turn back to him. While the church sadly seems to have lost its sense of urgency concerning the task that we are called to undertake in making Jesus known in our generation. God sends us to the lost sheep of Eastwood.

There is a complacency around in our society there we are OK, then we can do just as we please, it doesn't matter. Many people in our country today consider themselves to be Christians simply by the fact that they have been baptised, or because they live in a Christian country. It is our responsibility to warn them this, in and of itself is not a ticket to heaven, that it is not enough to please God, but they need to demonstrate that they are true Christians by the way that they live.

In our society where tolerance is considered to be a virtue, this message will not be popular. Just like Jesus needed his father's reassurance that he was well pleased with his son, we also need the reassurance that we have been adopted into God's family, that our heavenly father is pleased with us, in order that we can fulfil our calling and not allow other people's opinions to prevent us from being salt and light in our communities today.

I have an important message of hope and reassurance that they are truly loved, but they are special for money in our society who have often hearts, who have been let down badly by the failings of their human fathers.

This is an enormous undertaking. I'm sure many of us find this to be a daunting prospect and feel that we are not up to the task. We have absolutely no reason to be afraid. Those who God calls, he also equips. We too need the power of the Holy Spirit help us reach out to our community with the love of God. All we need to do is make ourselves available to God I'm simply ask for the Holy Spirit. My favourite verse in Luke reminds us how much more well God gave the Holy Spirit to those who ask. Let's see what God can do with those who are open to him