

Group Notes 5 December 2010
John the Baptist #2 – his mission

Welcome - Ice Breaker

A statue of Sister Dora has just been created for the Manor Hospital. Assuming that a statue is going to be made of you (you have no option to refuse), where in the world would you want it put? Why?

Word - Sermon Summary: Read Luke 1:67-80

Today's reading gives us the words of John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, sung in prophecy over John at the time of his circumcision when he was 8 days old. See chapter 1 verses 5 to 66 for the whole story.

Zechariah prophesies what his new son's mission will be in years to come when he has become a man:-

1. He will be a prophet of the Most High, v.76. In a real sense John is the last of the Old Testament prophets. As they prophesied hundreds of years beforehand about the coming Messiah, so John prophesies immediately beforehand of His coming.
2. He will go before the Lord to prepare His way, v 76b. Note that John in fact went before Jesus and prepared the way for Him, so Luke is telling us here that Jesus is both the Lord and the Most High.
3. He will give people knowledge of salvation, v.77. John himself is not the Saviour but he points everyone to the One who will bring salvation. This supports with what John's Gospel says, that John the Baptist was not himself the light but came to bear witness to the light – see John 1:6-8.
4. This salvation comes through the forgiveness of sins, v.77b. John's baptism of repentance from sins (see last week's Group Notes) prepared the way for the fullness of forgiveness that would come through Jesus. Repentance is not completed until it is coupled to faith in Christ.
5. John's ministry will be an expression of God's own tender mercy, v.79. Although John's message seems very challenging and his personality intimidating (see last week's notes again), that is because God in His love wants to shake us out of our complacency so that we can get a life.
6. It is the ministry of Elijah, from Malachi 4:1-6: compare v.78b here with Mal 4:2, and the turning of feet into the way of peace in v.79b here with the turning of hearts to one another in Mal 4:6. Mal 4:1 talks about a coming fire which will burn up all the stubble and this is echoed by John in Luke 3:17. That is why Christian commentators identify John with the prophecy about Elijah in Malachi 4:5.

However more than anything else John's ministry will be about Jesus. Most of points 1-6 above are really directed towards Jesus, but more than that even John's own dad singing this prophecy over him spends most of his time talking about Jesus. Jesus is the horn (a symbol of power and mastery) of salvation, v.69. Jesus is the son of David, v.69b. Jesus brings salvation and rescue, v.71 and 74. Jesus fulfils the Old Testament, whether in prophecies, v.70, in the covenant, v.72, or in the promise to Abraham, v.73.

John was therefore never going to be more than a signpost in his ministry. His mission was simply this: to point people to Jesus.

Word 2 - Discussion Questions:-

- The Old Testament figures very strongly in today's message. As well as picking up on a parallel part of the book of Malachi we've had to take on board references to the Old Covenant, Abraham, David, Elijah and Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah.
 - How important is the Old Testament to your faith?
 - How important is it to your understanding of who Jesus is and what He came to do?
- Malachi prophesied that John would "turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the hearts of the children to their parents".
 - What do you think of the generation gap?
 - Does God still want to break it down?
 - Should we work with it, stratifying our worship and activities by age group?
 - Or against it, offering our unity through diversity as a witness to the love of Christ? Is this even realistic these days?
- John was never going to be any more than a signpost...
 - Are you a signpost? How clearly do you point other people to Jesus? And in what ways?
 - Are we nothing but signposts in our service to the Lord? Or has something fundamental changed since John's day?

Worship Ideas

Malachi 4:2b says, "You will go out and leap like calves released from the stall." My wife Elisa grew up on a farm in Finland and she tells me this happy and homely image is really true – when they've been kept in the barn for any length of time, the young calves really do come out and frisk about for joy when they are finally allowed out into the fields again.

What's the equivalent of leaping about like a calf released from a stall for your members? Give each one a sheet of paper and a pencil and ask them to draw a sketch of what they like to do when they're celebrating, or write a few words of description if they prefer. Then compare notes.

Close by reminding everyone that the joy of the Lord is our strength. Offer the pieces of paper to God in prayer and give thanks to Him for the joy and freedom He brings us through the Gospel.

Works / Witness

Is there someone affected by the cold you could help this week? Perhaps they can't get to the shops... or go and meet their friends... or pay their heating bill...

Is there someone you could invite to our Christmas services?

- Carol Service 19 Dec 6.30
- Crib Service 24 Dec 5.00
- Midnight Mass 24 Dec 11.15
- Christmas Day celebration 10.00