

“What shall we do then? - the crowds to John the Baptist

The prophetic message of judgement given by the Old Testament prophets was invariably accompanied by a strong call for repentance, since only repentance could avert judgement. Precisely such a call for repentance was very evident with John the Baptist, who in his generation also proclaimed a message of “coming wrath”. Like his Old Testament forebears he challenged the prevailing behaviour of his day and demanded a radical change of lifestyle. When his demands are examined they prove to be remarkably similar to the demands made by the Old Testament prophets many centuries before. They focus on possessions, money, violence and sexual license. They fully underline the message of the Old Testament prophets and greatly strengthen the message they have for our times. The threat of judgement lay over the Jews of the New Testament for the very same reasons that it had laid over their Old Testament counterparts.

John engaged in a widespread ministry of baptizing people for the repentance of sin. He would not, however, baptize people lightly but demanded “*fruit in keeping with repentance*” (Lk.3:8). The crowd wanted to know exactly what he meant by this: “*What do you want us to do?*” was a constant question on people’s lips. It was a realistic and important question, and fortunately we know enough about his preaching to be able to put together a fairly comprehensive picture of his answers to that question.

Money and Possessions

His main thrust in calling for repentance had to do with money and possessions. When the crowds repeatedly asked him what they should do he had an extraordinarily simple word for them: “*The man who has two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same*” (Lk. 3:11). Thus constituted an incredibly penetrating personal demand to think more of the poor and less of themselves. It actually went beyond a call to honesty. Though so simple, it amounted to nothing less than an outright challenge to each person to re-appraise their outlook on their possessions and their neighbours. Jewish society had become utterly selfish in its outlook and attitudes. It was this that John rebuked; it was a matter of great importance to God.

This simple answer needs looking at in detail lest it be too easily brushed aside. The “tunic” John referred to was an undergarment, not the indispensable outer tunic (there are precise words for both). It was common for a traveller to wear two of these undergarments, though one was sufficient. John did not imply there was anything wrong in having two, but he said that if a person came across someone without such an undergarment he should give him one of his two. John was advocating, in other words, a readiness to share with others to the point where a person might be left with a bare but sufficient minimum for themselves. He is not advocating in general a giving away of something that is an absolute essential (like the outer tunic or one essential undergarment) so that the person is left destitute. Neither is he referring to a sharing of an excessive overflow of possessions (a third or fourth garment!). He is referring to giving something that will not leave a person destitute but will nonetheless call for a real sacrifice in terms of normal living. It will bring the person to a level of having simple necessities whilst providing for those who do not have those necessities. The same implication is present in the call to share food with someone who has none.

The simplicity of this should not blind us to the fact it amounted to an attempt to establish a completely new “benchmark” of behaviour concerning possessions. In modern parlance we might say it constituted an outright challenge to the mindset of the consumer society. There was no place for anything remotely connected with the amassing of excessive personal possessions or the pursuit of the latest luxuries. Selfish pleasures were not to be the main goal of life. Greed, selfishness, self-seeking and the neglect of others in need was evidently the prevailing behaviour of John’s generation, and it was completely contrary to the outlook of the Kingdom of God which John was heralding. He wanted to make clear that unless his generation faced up to this and repented, the coming of the King would bring judgement, not life. **It is precisely this challenge of John’s which is the challenge which God presents to our own generation, and not least to Christian people caught up in the prevailing standards of the consumer society. It is a very difficult challenge to respond to when its implications are fully understood and it is a challenge all too easy to dismiss.**

A completely new “benchmark” for possessions

Jesus picked up exactly the same theme in his own teaching: “*Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys*” Lk 12:38. And what he preached he practiced, for the disciples money bag was frequently used to help the poor (Jn 13:29). It was a theme no less evident in the early church which was full of the Holy Spirit and saw people selling their second homes in order to give the proceeds to the poor. The prevailing attitude of that church was that what belonged to them was as much for the benefit of others as for themselves (Acts 2:44-45).

It may come as a surprise to us that John in his ministry should major on such a reply, rather than what might appear to be grosser sins. But the covetous, self-seeking spirit with its luxurious indulgence knows no bounds and leads ultimately to corruption, violence and gross injustice. It was precisely this that Amos exposed in his day and for which his generation was judged. It was a key message for John’s generation and **it is a key message for our generation.**

Excessive Money Making and Violence

“What shall we do?” was also a question on the lips of tax collectors and soldiers. Both of these categories were almost certainly Jews, not Romans. The “tax collectors” were of lesser rank than the main tax “farmers” and did the actual collecting of the money. They were normally Jews, and such service for Rome brought them hatred from the people. Likewise the soldiers were Jews who had a military function under the Romans and were similarly despised. In the nature of the case, therefore, these were people who were prepared to face down criticism for the sake of getting rich. They were ready to use the

ample opportunities that lay before them for substantial and dishonest gain. The tax collectors could set their own price and reap a profit beyond anything that could be considered fair, and the soldiers could extort money by the threat of false accusation. Dishonesty, greed and corruption marked out these two categories of people and such blatant self-seeking was actually protected by the very structures of the Roman rule. The Jewish world of John and Jesus stands out as appallingly venal and corrupt. The modern world and our own nation present clear parallels.

To the tax gatherers John replied, “*Do not exact more than is due*” and to the soldiers, “*Be content with your wages*.” They were a long way from a lifestyle in which they knew contentment with a reasonable return. They were just money orientated and unscrupulous. Again it was an incredibly simple response, but an introduction to a profound and radical new life style. The crowds would have consisted of a great many more people who, though not as blatantly avaricious as the tax collectors and soldiers, nonetheless were guilty of just the same discontented attitude. Violence and dishonest money making seemed to have been part of the way of life. Such a society is always under the threat of judgement; and violence is always both a judgement in itself and an invitation to greater judgement.

Religion without Morals and Politics without Principle

One particular phrase stands out vividly among the rebukes that John had for those who came for baptism; “**You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?**” (Matt. 3:7). Matthew particularly sees this sharp description as primarily aimed at the Pharisees and Sadducees. It was to these that the call for “*fruit in keeping with repentance*” was especially directed. Thus, rather than seeing the religious leaders as exempt from his demands, John saw them as those most needing the call to repent. This was very strong language. But he was not simply being abusive: the fact was that the religious establishment, like snakes, was not to be trusted and was poisonous, both in behaviour and teaching. It was in fact language that Jesus himself of the same people: at the end of his ministry in his great proclamation of woes on the Pharisees he referred to them not only as snakes but also as whitewashed tombs! (Matt 23)

“They were most unlikely to listen to the demands for moral uprightness”

John knew that they were most unlikely to listen to the highly personal demands for moral uprightness he was making, for he knew that there hung over them an overweening spiritual pride that made any real heart attitude of compassion to the poor virtually impossible. He also knew that if they asked for baptism it would be for motives other than repentance, most probably to keep their status with the crowds. The overriding concern of the Sadducees (the High Priestly families) was not simply religious but political. Their energies were taken up with making sure that they remained in favour with the Roman authorities but without seeming to be unpatriotic. They were intent on maintaining the religious observances of the Temple and enjoying its monetary benefits and the prestige it afforded because it brought them political status. They were particularly sensitive to any kind of extremist activity, political or religious, that might bring retribution from Rome and lose them their position. They were hopelessly enmeshed in a politico/religious framework. The concern of the Pharisees on the other hand was to maintain their status as “spiritual leaders”, majoring on a mass of legal demands.

John knew perfectly well that both parties would have a theological answer for any moral castigations he might make, and he anticipates the classic form of defence that both were likely to make by saying to them, “*do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our Father’*” (Matt. 3:9). In the minds of both Sadducee and Pharisee their acceptance with God depended entirely on their birth as Jews, literal sons of Abraham – this was the rock of their religion. God was bound to approve of them because they were Jews, and Jews of high spiritual rank. The witness of their prophetic scriptures was completely lost on them: in no way could they see themselves as counterparts of the religious figures for which the Old Testament prophets had such strictures in their day, and there is nothing stronger in the Old Testament prophets than their condemnation of their religious and political leaders. They were absolutely (and willfully) blind to the moral essence of the Jewish faith. Tragically right throughout John’s ministry and Jesus’ ministry this was exactly the position they clung to, even to the point, like their fathers, of destroying the prophetic witness. Thus the religious and political establishment brought upon itself and the nation an appalling judgement. The sharpest of language could not dislodge them.

Sex and Wrong Relationships

John’s challenge to repentance was widespread, and dangerous. It was never more dangerous than when it touched on the many evils in Herod’s life, and in particular his personal and sexual life. He openly rebuked Herod’s adultery and incestuous marriage with Herodias (Lk. 3:19). Herod had been determined to have Herodias even though they were both married to other partners, and he persuaded Herodias to leave her husband and at the same time forced his own wife to flee. Two forced divorces, however, were made much worse by the fact that Herodias’ husband was Herod’s half brother and therefore any union between Herod and Herodias was illegal and incestuous. Herod’s behaviour brought its own nemesis: friendship with his divorced wife’s father, Aretas (a ruler of Arabia), ceased and struggle broke out between their respective kingdoms, and eventually Herodias’ brought about the downfall of Herod through her willful ambition.

There are indications in the ministry of Jesus that it was not just Herod but his whole generation that was sexually lax. Divorce was for the most part easy, being obtainable for anything that offended the husband. Even Jesus’ disciples expressed surprise at Jesus’ own strong statements curtailing divorce, wondering how people could possibly live without some real freedom in that area! (Matt. 19:10). At a worse level still, Jesus own ministry to redeem prostitutes comes out very clearly in the gospels and suggests such women were not few in number. His was an immoral age and on that account ripe for judgement. Bad as it was, however, the sexual license of that generation was nothing like that of our own. At least the forms of marriage were in place, and open promiscuity was frowned upon. If a lack of restraint brought the nation of John and Jesus under strong proclamation of judgement, how much more must our own. A more accurate comparison of our own would be with Sodom and Gomorrah, and the judgement on those cities is plain for all to see.

All this reveals John the Baptist, Jesus, Amos and his fellow prophets as very much in the same mold in their prophetic activity with regard to judgement. Their demands remain only too plain for us today.