

## Sermon: Change is needed

Luke 3:7-18

*Jos M Strengholt*

The church of John the Baptist was filling up. People came in big numbers. But the sermons of John were not your classical how to grow your church message but fire and brimstone

People came to John in an advent mood - they had high expectations. it was a happy time of expecting a new work of God in this world.

As we focus on how our Lord will come to our sick and tired world, to our life...

The coming of Jesus Christ, which was the expectation of John and of us, is good news! Good news? If you listen to John is was not good at all!

Masses came and what does he do?

### Change demanded

John calls the people a brood of vipers. That's not nice! And instead of being a welcoming, open church, he begins by questioning their motives.

Repentance is not enough, he underlines. We do not only need a change of worldview - that is the primary meaning of repentance - but a change of lifestyle is needed as well!

John exemplified that change. How he dressed was not in line with the fashion of his days. His food was not from the Michelin star restaurants; he withdrew from the evil empire of power games and using other people for your own ends.

Do not accept status quo, was his message, and live differently. He preached it and he lived that message.

John lashed out at them - obviously with some insight in the human heart.

We are Jews, they thought, we are fine with God. Did he not make great promises to Abraham? Are we not his children? God cannot do without us! We are irreplaceable!

So why did they come to the church of John? For a beautiful holy moment? for a blessing for the heart?

John makes two things clear: our religious background makes no difference to God. Lutherans, Copts, Catholics, baptists? Anglicans? So what! It's not enough and it is not that important.

God can make children of Abraham even from these stones, is what John told those Jewish people that came for baptism. Maybe John pointed to the stones on the waterside. Yes, God made fantastic promises to the posterity of Abraham but... If those sons of Abraham do not obey God, they have no future. And God can make others, even those gentile stones, into children of Abraham. Paul in his letter to the Romans says much of this, 25 years later.

The Jews at that time believed that God had a favoured nation clause... He would judge nations by one standard and Israel by another.

John made clear that there is no racial privilege with God. And we may add, no denominational privilege either. That is one thing John made clear. Lineage does not help us. How our parents raised us up does not bring us to God. Surely it is good to grow up in a fine family and a good church, but then? God has children but no grandchildren.

The right theology (the change of worldview) and the right rituals (baptism) are irrelevant for God if they are not accompanied with a renewed lifestyle.

And that is the second thing John underlines. The only way to please God is a changed worldview combined with a change of life that flows out of this worldview. The right worldview is utterly important and rituals are very important. But if they are not accompanied by a life that glorifies God, John not so kindly but very clearly says, we are as useless as dry wood that is only good to be burned.

Not nice John!

### Matter of lifestyle

But many people responded well. 3 groups of people come to John and they all ask the right question: what must we do. What we do, that is what the Christian life is about.

That does not disqualify the importance of faith and religious actions like baptism and holy communion, but it is the goal of our faith and our religious life. What we do in our daily life.

Group 1: general people. Their question: "What must we do!"

John's answer: If you have two tunics give one away. If you have two loaves of bread give one to the hungry.

Some Christians talk much about tithing - John speaks of giving away 50%. we should not see this as law to be taken literally. The issue is: if someone is in need, help that person with what he or she needs. The capstone of the Christian life is: love for others made practical.

Compare John 3:16, *for God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son...* with 1 John 3:16: *This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.*

How God gave his son is our example. In that same way we are to show love for others. By a sacrificial lifestyle.

Group 2: the tax collectors... These were really crooks. The Roman Empire knew a system of what we called tax farming. You could bid for the right to collect tax in a certain area, and you would then pay a lump sum to the government.

And then you began to collect tax - and all that was for your own pocket. This was easy for government - it delegated the headache of taxation to commercial guys, and government got a fixed amount. But it was a great headache for the people as they were effectively robbed.

Stop extortion, John says to those people. Public office should not be used for your own gain but to serve the people, that is the will of God. If you have any position in life, use it for the good of all!

Group 3: then some soldiers came. John has a similar message for them. Do not use your power to make the life of people hard, but serve them.

An interesting thought: tax officer and soldiers worked for the oppressive Roman Empire that occupied Israel. These were mostly Jewish people who collaborated with the foreign oppressors. John was not a revolutionary who said: you cannot serve a bad government. His message is, in whatever circumstances you are, always use your work for the benefit of the people.

Our jobs, our status in life, is not less important than worship in church; they com-

plement our Christian worship, and they are our worship of God as God wants it from us.

With this approach to work, John sanctifies daily life. All things are important for God. How we cook, how we paint, how we preach, how we do our accounts, how we teach, how we live our daily lives. The question is not so much what sort of job we have; the issue is, how we do those jobs for God. How we do all our work for the benefit of others. If we do this, God is glorified in our lives.

The people coming to John were impressed and wondered -is this the expected savior, the Messiah? No, John says, he will be much mightier than I am.

And again, John doesn't use sweet words speaking of the redeemer - Jesus Christ. He speaks of a baptism in the Holy Spirit and with fire. Now our Pentecostal brethren can get all excited about this verse, but be careful.

Yes indeed, there is reason for excitement. John says that the coming messiah will baptize us in the Holy Spirit. This is a clear reference to many promises in the Old Testament where we see that God will one day pour his spirit out on his people. Jesus is the one who will give spiritual renewal to his people.

Well, that is just what we need!

But this spiritual renewal is not without fire. This baptism in spirit and fire has an aspect of judgment. John made clear - people who know their theology but do not do it, fire awaits them - Judgment of god. But even those who follow him must expect judgment. It is impossible for the Holy Spirit to work in our life without him also burning away what is wrong and what needs change.

So John does not promise a sweet Jesus.

Verse 18 says "with any other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them."

Good news? He was calling people a brood of vipers, he warned them for the fire of hell, and he told those who follow the messiah that even they will experience something of the judgment of God...

If you go with pain in your stomach to a doctor, and he tells you that something is really wrong but that an operation will solve the problem, you could say, we'll, bad news. On the other hand -the doctor shows a way

out. It is good news that he found out what the problem is and that he can solve it.

The Christian faith points to our problem and it shows the way out. Quite realistically our faith says that there is something wrong with our nature and our behaviour. The world would be a perfect place if we humans were perfect.

But we are not; change is need. That's why John, as a trustworthy doctor, tells us to repent and to live up to that by serving each other. If God would not care about us he would abandon us without notice. But he loves us enough to hurt us with the truth so that we have hope if we change our lifestyle.

The word of God can be painful as surgery, but it puts us on the road of recovery. If only we do it.

**Amen**