

Make way for the King

John 1:19-27

Ari Savuoja

Sermon at St. Luke's Chapel, 14 December 2014

Translation into English by Bastian Fähnrich

John 1:19-27

Now this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Messiah." They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No." Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'" Now the Pharisees who had been sent questioned him, "Why then do you baptise if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" "I baptise with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."

John was a man sent from God, who had a clear testimony of Jesus. A few Pharisees from Jerusalem – priests and Levites – had come to John the Baptist to present their question: "Who are you?" In today's gospel text we get to hear John's answer to them.

The text shows that the religious leaders at the time had become concerned about the popularity of John's activities and now they wanted to find out about the nature of his activity.

Their question could have been completely genuine, but probably not, because Jesus later accused the religious leaders of dishonesty towards John the Baptist.

John the Baptist's answer included three denials and one affirmative statement. He denied that He was the Christ, he denied being the prophet Elijah, and he denied to be a new prophet like Moses. All of these are promised in the Old Testament: Christ, and a prophet like Elijah and Moses.

Instead, John affirmed the questioners of Isaiah's prophecy, which required them to prepare their hearts for the coming of the Messiah. John answered: "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'" (Verse 23). The prophet Isaiah had prophesied about this hundreds of years earlier.

The questioners realised that John called them to repent and confess their sins. But they were not prepared for this. In their perplexed state of mind they quickly turned their attention to the baptism ceremony with its procedures. This seems to be typical also today when the word of God begins to really speak to people: they are avoiding it by paying attention to this or that thing that seems strange or weird about the Christian faith.

John further answered the Pharisees with the following words that must have astounded them greatly: "... among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." (verses 26-27)

John referred to Jesus, of course, but for some reason John did not directly tell them whom he actually meant.

John's greatest task was not to answer tricky questions of the religious leaders. No, he came to prepare the way for ordinary people's hearts, so that they can receive God's son.

This was the testimony of John: "The Messiah has already come, and he is here in our midst, He is infinitely more than I am, John, who bears witness of Him, and because of this you must prepare your hearts for His coming by means of repentance."

In today's language we could say that John was the medium, that is a means of communication, through which people were prepared for the release date, the deadline or zero hour of the great news.

In a way we could say that John was God's advertising campaign – if you allow using such an expression in this context. Compared to the present day, at the time of John and Jesus advertising campaigns were quite different. Today, for example, presidential elections are advertised systematically in the media, and the candidates' public image are created with a big budget. There are photos on posters outdoors, in newspapers and the internet, TV ads, videos, merchandise for fans and supporters, etc.

Also, today's church election candidates devote a lot to advertising and their public appearance, which in itself is necessary, although it may go too far in certain cases and ways.

Alongside today's advertising campaigns, the campaign of John the Baptist seems a little strange. John was not very easy to reach, because he lived in the wilderness. His clothing and appearance was not clean.

Nevertheless, a large number of people came to John to listen to him. For a long time the Israelites hadn't had a prophet, and now the rumour of a great prophet had spread effectively. The people were in great expectation.

According to today's standards, John's message was very strange: He called some of his listeners "snakes" or "a brood of vipers" and proclaimed the coming judgment (Luke 3:7). He insisted that following God has to show up in action. "Produce fruit that is consistent with repentance!" (Luke 3:8). John declared that people need to repent, change their hearts, and turn to God [and show by their actions that true change has taken and is taking place].

But: even though John's media skills don't match up with our present means of communication, he touched people with his message. People asked him what they should do. John answered that good actions should be directed to others, away from themselves. They should also think for the benefit of the other, not just for their own benefit. Joy cannot be found by doing good and keeping to oneself. Joy is found by directing the good to other people. "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same." (Luke 3:10)

John the Baptist prepared the people of his time, so that Jesus could come to them, and enter their hearts. John was not hesitant, and he did not care about his popularity or fashionable trends when bringing his message across. His simple sermons paved the way for Jesus' gospel, the good news.

John's message made people realise their own situation. It removed the belief of people that they could manage before God on their own; it removed their delusion of being without sin and made them thirsty to be granted a pardon and forgiveness.

In this way we must listen to John. It is us, we have often been the “snakes” or “brood of vipers”, we who thought it possible of being saved by our own good lives. We, too, were sometimes the ones thinking that we could stand our ground before God thanks to our righteousness. We too have had many times two shirts, sometimes three or four, and we have not given any of these away to anyone in need – and we have pants and skirts, jackets and shoes, just everything in abundance.

This is how we prepare the way for the King to come into our own hearts. This is the Christmas joy and peace. Our Lord was born human to eventually bear the punishment of our sins, for the sinful fact that we have been deceitful, that we have been dishonest, that we have behaved in a cowardly and fearful way, that we've talked and spoken our words silver-tongued, that we have been self-righteous and self-sufficient.

Praise be to our Lord Jesus Christ, who was born as our brother and who bore all our sinfulness.

Let's pray: Holy God, dear heavenly Father, thank you for giving us John the Baptist to make way for the coming of our Lord! Thank you that we shall rejoice in all the good, what you have done for us and others, our next ones. Thank you for enabling us to love all people, especially those who are in need in their lives about everyday necessities. Thank you that we are able to go along with those people, and mourn with them, share their grief, loss and fear in life. Thank you that by doing so we can help preparing your way to our own hearts and the hearts of other people. Thank you that You Yourself prepare the way in us for your goodness and Christmas joy and peace. Amen.