



2. Preparing the Road



Starter

The phrase, 'It's good to get away for a while' is often used by busy people if they have a few days or longer away from work, on holiday or at home. What are the advantages of 'getting away for a while' and does it matter where we go?

Share any personal experiences of times and places.

Reading The Word

Read Luke 3:1-6 (and if time allows, Malachi 3:1-4)

Introduction

As we pass from the Old to the New Testament there is a time gap of around four hundred years when to the Jews it seems as if God was silent, and they were hungry both to hear that voice again, and welcome the long hoped for and promised Messiah.

So the gospels writers are keen to provide a point of connection, which is seen in the person and ministry of John the Baptist echoing the words of Isaiah, the greatest of the prophets, and Malachi, whose words form the final book of our Old Testament and look forward to that which God is going to do among his people.

Key Verse

*'A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
"Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.
Every valley shall be filled in,
every mountain and hill made low.
The crooked roads shall become straight,
the rough ways smooth.
And all people will see God's salvation.'"*
(Luke 3:4b-6)

SAMPLE

Discussion

The Jews were longing to hear the voice of God again. Is that how you feel? If not, are you able to share how God still speaks into your life and experiences?

Context

Luke places John the Baptist into a real time and place historically. Tiberius became Emperor in his own right in AD 14 which now makes it AD 28-29.

Herod the Great died in 4 BC and divided his kingdom between three of his sons. Herod Antipas was given Galilee and Peraea and he reigned from 4 BC to AD 39. Herod Philip ruled over Iturea and Trachonitis to the north east of Galilee from 4 BC to AD 33. During his reign, the city of Caesarea Philippi was built and named after him.

Judea, Samaria and Edom in the south were given to Archelaus who was a dreadful ruler, and after protests from the Jews he was removed by the Romans, who then installed a governor. So this area became under direct Roman rule, and from AD 25-37 Pilate was the governor.

Lysanias is a bit of a mystery, his identity unclear, but in these few verses Luke has set John solidly within the political world in which he and Jesus would grow up.

Not content with that, Luke also informs us about the religious hierarchy at the time. Caiaphas was the reigning high priest although his father-in-law Annas, whom he had succeeded to the post, was still the most influential religious figure in the land and therefore the one in John's Gospel to whom Jesus is first brought after his arrest (John 18:13).

Discussion

How important is it to have the historical context to the events that you read about in the Bible?

Do you think of the New Testament as 'story' or 'history'?

The Desert Life

We don't know much about John as he grew up, but a sense of his own destiny and calling seems to have directed him to the desert by way of preparation, and it is in that isolated place that he received the word from God to start his important mission.

Almost three centuries after the death of Jesus there was a movement started by Anthony the Great in seeking the solitude of desert places, particularly in Egypt and Syria, and living a very simple and austere existence under what must have been very harsh conditions. These Desert Fathers, as they were called, offered an alternative Christian society, a monasticism that influenced the development of Christianity throughout the known world.

On the remote and rocky Atlantic island of Skellig Michael, off the south eastern coast of Ireland, at one of the most westerly points of first century Christendom a monastery was founded between the 6th and 8th century, the monks building beehive huts out of stone on ledges 700 feet above saw-tooth rocks. It remained continuously occupied until its abandonment in the late 12th century. The remains of the monastery, along with most of the island itself, became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1996.

Being alone with God. Simplicity of life. Prayer and meditation. That was where John found the strength and vision to begin his work. Many have followed his example since.

Discussion

Is taking time out now and then from the bustle of daily life important for us both physically and spiritually? How does it help our spiritual life?

Is the 'Quiet Time' at the beginning or close of a day a good discipline?

Do we welcome, or find uncomfortable, periods of quiet reflection within a time of worship?

The Waters of Baptism

Baptism is a powerful sign of renewal. The River Jordan is significant for Jews because the tribes of Israel under Joshua crossed the river on dry ground to enter the Promised Land after years of wandering in the desert.

They were now in need of another 'Exodus' from their current oppressors and hoped for God's provision once again.

Israel's misfortune was often connected with the nation's sin, and so there may well have been an expectation that after so many years another prophet would appear, both to reproach the people for their sinful lives and encourage a return to holiness and obedience to God.

John certainly had the look of a prophet about him!

'Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' (Matthew 16:14)

Baptism was usually reserved for Gentile converts to Judaism rather than Jews themselves. The fact that John was calling the nation to a time of repentance, symbolised by this ritual cleansing in water, says a lot about the state of Israel's relationship with God.

However, this was the path that the people would have to take if they wanted to be ready and spiritually prepared for what God was about to do.

Discussion

Baptism is observed in different ways within our various denominations. If you are accustomed to infant baptism, can you see some benefit in (metaphorically at least) following the Jews into the Jordan as adults to make that profession of repentance?

How easy is it as Christians to think, rather like the Jews of John's time, that we're OK now and can happily live as we like?



Preparing The Road

The quote from Isaiah about preparing the way and making straight the path imagines John as a king's messenger who, prior to a royal visit to a region, would go ahead and make sure that not only were preparations being made at the destination for such an auspicious visitor, but that potholes were filled in on the approach roads, and the way made both safe and appropriate for royal use.

The analogy is a good one, and might be compared with the reception Jesus received on his final journey to Jerusalem, when people spread palm branches ahead of him on the road. This is no ordinary person whose imminent presence John has come to announce - indeed no ordinary king - but rather the Son of God, Messiah!

'And all people will see God's salvation' (Luke 3:6)

The people, the priests and the leaders of the nation needed to get themselves ready!

Discussion

Is there still a role for Christians by following John the Baptist in keeping the road straight and weed-free?

What can the Church do through Advent to better prepare the population of our villages, towns and cities for the real message of Christmas?

'At this Christmas when Christ comes, will He find a warm heart? Mark the season of Advent by loving and serving the others with God's own love and concern.'

(Mother Teresa, Love: A Fruit Always in Season)

'Politicians compete for the highest offices. Business tycoons scramble for a bigger and bigger piece of the pie. Armies march and scientists study and philosophers philosophise and preachers preach and labourers sweat. But in that silent baby, lying in that humble manger, there pulses more potential power and wisdom and grace and aliveness than all the rest of us can imagine.'

(Brian D. McLaren, We Make the Road by Walking: A Year-Long Quest for Spiritual Formation)

(Artwork in this study is 'The birth of John the Baptist' by Rogier van der Weyden, and 'John the Baptist in the Wilderness' by Geertgen tot Sint Jans)