

Luke 3: 1-6 – Prepare the Way of the Lord!

Prayer

Trachonitis – it sounds rather like a particularly unwelcome throat disease, but actually it's the name of a place in the Middle East over which Philip, brother of Herod, ruled in the early first century. There it is in our reading from Luke's Gospel. Having given us two chapters on the birth of John the Baptist and then Jesus, Luke fast-forwards twenty years or so to the start of John the Baptist's work. And he is very keen to locate this very precisely and accurately – where and when. The events he is going to tell us about are not from some fictional realm or make-belief time. They happened in this world, when John exploded on the scene with the word of the Lord. Luke simply summarises his message – he was *proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*. Then Luke draws on some words from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah – *Prepare the way of the Lord*. Luke locates John in the real world of Pilate and Herod and Philip and Annas and Caiaphas, but he is not part of their world. He is a prophet. He is a spokesman of the Lord.

We can think about his message this morning with three words that may have something for all of us – Repent! Forgiveness and Prepare.

Repent! This is not a word we use very much inside this building and do we use it at all outside? We probably think it means being sorry, even being very deeply sorry. And if we feel that there isn't much for us to be sorry for, then we are likely to gloss it over it altogether and move on to something more appealing. But *repent* is a word that is much more about change than being sorry. It's change your mind; think differently. And more. Now Anna will tell you that when I'm driving, I don't do back or turn around. But sometimes – even with the wonderful Google maps on the phone – I have to change direction. That's *Repent*. It means change our values. I remember someone talking about, I think it was Easter, but it could have been Christmas – *It's all about family...* Do you want to think about that for a minute?

Repent is a word that works on so many levels. Luke gives us a glimpse into the first century world with all those powerful men mentioned – Pilate, Herod, Caiaphas – these were the movers and shakers. But God's message to them through John was *Repent* – change your ways. What about the movers and shakers today? Maybe we should be bolder in calling them to *repent*, to change their policies and the way they talk about people who are not like us... But it is easy to think about how others should *repent* – what about us? What is there in my life that needs to be different? And what about us as a church family? Where do we need to repent – change/adjust even direction?

Forgiveness – our second word. And it follows on quite neatly from *Repent*. If we have to change direction in some way, then that means we have to admit that haven't got it right before. And that's not easy. Last week I needed a haircut and went off to the Barbers, but it was shut and as I walked home it began to rain. And when I got home, I thought how hard can it be? Got out the old electric cutter-thing and went to work. I thought it looked good and went to show Anna and she didn't know whether to laugh or cry. The word lawn-mower came up. Thankfully Anna did a wonderful rescue job. *Repent* – means never try that again. Forgiveness meant I needed to sit down, be quiet and get sorted out.

Sometimes we can get mixed up about forgiveness and confuse it with having our excuses accepted. It's easy if we get something wrong, instead of saying sorry to God or someone else, for us to say, *I was tired*, or *I was under pressure or stressed*. *It wasn't my fault!* We all know the excuses off the

peg, and if those fail, we can make something up. Whereas asking for forgiveness is something else. Forgiveness means that we put our hands up – yes, I did that wrong; or I shouldn't have said that. Maybe it's acknowledging to God all those thoughts we were having that we just didn't dare put into words. Forgiveness comes after taking responsibility. I wonder if we have really heard that God wants to forgive us? Sometimes I imagine a kind of stand-off with God. The Lord is saying, *I forgive you*. And obstinate me, standing there, arms folded, demanding that God accept that it wasn't my fault. Until I can let that go, I am simply not free to receive the promise he longs to give. Sometimes we just need to let go and accept that God loves us and that it's all right – when he promises to forgive, he does mean it.

Sometimes people talk about the need to forgive themselves, and I know what they mean. But that can be quite confusing – quite who is forgiving and being forgiven? It can be more helpful perhaps simply to accept that God forgives you, and if he forgives you, you are forgiven. If you need to talk this one through, please do with one of the church leaders here or me...

Our third word is Prepare. One of the great Advent themes – *Prepare the way of the Lord*. Isaiah said it, wrote it. John the Baptist did it. Our preparations tend to be much more mundane – buying and wrapping presents, writing cards, setting up decorations and getting the food in. But what about preparing our hearts? How are we preparing to meet Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-us?

There's a poem I love by R S Thomas, Welshman of course – 'The Bright Field' –

I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while, and gone my way
and forgotten it. But that was the pearl
of great price, the one field that had
the treasure in it. I realise now
that I must give all that I have
to possess it. Life is not hurrying

on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.

Not hurrying on nor hankering after... turning aside. Last Sunday David referred to *Christians standing in the dark with their faces lit by the coming dawn*.

Prepare – what will you do to prepare? Read a suitable book – that's always my first option. But maybe the question is – what will you be to prepare? Sit for 10 minutes each day – quiet, just you and Jesus and see what happens. Read a book of the Bible you don't know very well. There was a sign outside the Quakers meeting house – *Don't just do something, sit there*. Be still and know...

Prayer