

Lesson 22 Luke 7:18-35
“Affirming the Messenger”
April 26, 2009

Introduction

Almost exactly 5 months ago we discovered an imaginary archaeological record which allowed us to get into the skin of Zechariah during the time when he was enduring his enforced silence as a result of his questioning the word of God about a child that was to be born to him and Elizabeth in their old age.

Today we come to a text in Luke 7 where this son, John the Baptizer, is the main focus. I want to use a similar tactic today in an effort to bring this text into real life. The following words are rooted in and informed by Holy Scripture and put into a form which I pray will be accessible and challenging to all of us.

Imagine with me... we have just discovered a journal entry that John has left behind in his cell after that fateful day when he was decapitated and had his head served on a platter to the wicked Herodias.

John's Jail Journal...

At long last my mind is at rest. I am now convinced! Now I may die in peace. I must admit that I have lived in deep anxiety over these past months. Ever since Herod threw me into this dungeon I have only been able to hear bits and pieces about what *He* is doing out there and what I hear is so very different from what I expected that my mind has been in turmoil with the thought that maybe my whole life has been wasted! Maybe I have been deceived all these years; maybe I laid down my life for an imposter. It's difficult for me to fully explain the change that came over me just the other day when he sent that message via my friends. In order for me to express it to you I feel as though I need to tell some of my life story. You see... for me this has always been an 'all in' or 'all out' deal. There has never been an option for me to sit on the fence.

For any who might one day discover and read this entry, I want to share some of my story with 2 ends in mind: 1) that you might come to feel the same overwhelming confidence that I now feel in this Person named Jesus and 2) so that you would understand how the heart of the ministry that God gave me to do still carries on and ought to challenge people in the ages to come.

My earliest childhood memories are such that I knew from day 1 that I was different from my peers. To begin with, my parents were more than old enough to be my grandparents. I was the brunt of many a joke among my peers whose parents were young enough to be my parents children. Even my parents at times would have a good laugh as they recalled the shock in the community when mom, already in her old age, began to tell people she was pregnant. But then, whenever the conversation drifted in that direction, dad would get suddenly very... how shall I describe it... serious, but not just serious; he got very passionate as he told the story. He would get down right at my level like as if he didn't want me to miss a word. He spoke most passionately about the visit from the angel of the Lord during the course of his priestly duties at the temple. This was, as he kept reminding me the most significant moment in his life! He told me many times of the 9 months of enforced silence and how looking back he knew that God was preparing him to believe that I, his son, would be used by God in a very special way to prepare our people, Israel, for the coming Messiah.

Whenever dad spoke like this, something stirred within me. I couldn't explain it then and even now it is something of a mystery to me, but right from an early age, I somehow knew that God was with me and was calling me to something special.

Dad was very concerned about 2 things during my formative years – he made sure that I never drank any wine (quite unusual in our culture) and he taught me to respect and read and study the Torah even as a young boy.

And then there was my name. This also set me apart from my peers. Instead of being named in the usual family tradition, my name comes out of left field – apparently for a special purpose!

When I was old enough to live on my own I felt too different from those around me and so I went and lived pretty much like a hermit in the desert. There I scratched out a meagre living from the land, eating such things as locusts and wild honey, and dressed like a wild man. In that desert place, away from the distractions of life, I felt the presence of God within me like a fire.

God began to show me a picture there in the desert. He showed me a picture of a roadway – it was a very rough road; it was strewn full of rocks and debris; it was so clogged with junk as to make it virtually impassable.

I said, “What is the meaning of this cluttered roadway?” He replied, “I am about to send My Anointed One. I Myself will travel this road to visit My people. I am calling you to prepare the way for My visit.”

“But what is the meaning of the rocks, obstacles and debris?” I asked. “The cluttered roadway”, He said, “is a picture of the hearts of My people. I am now coming personally to visit My chosen people to whom I have sent many messengers in the past. My people have built a superstructure of religious practice but their hearts are very far away from me. Their hearts are full of sticks, stones and debris just like this roadway. They offer sacrifices to me, but at the same time they swindle and deceive each other, they abuse powerful positions to take advantage of the weak and the poor, they are self-centered and greedy; their hearts are full of lust and sexual immorality. John, I am equipping you to call them to pay attention to the condition of their hearts so they when I visit, they will see Me for Who I am! You must call them to repent from their evil ways so that they may see My Glory.”

“John, when I come, it will look different that what you or they might imagine. If their hearts are not prepared; if they do not repent from their sin, it is very possible that they will miss Me all together. They will not recognize me for Who I am! And so this is an urgent responsibility – go in the power of My name and call My people to repentance!”

Well, I have never been known as one who holds back from speaking truth. God gave me that gift from birth! With these visions in the desert, however, God gave me a boldness that was far beyond my human strength. By His power, many people came and repented and were baptized. God began to move among our people. I made a curious observation during those days. It seemed that those who were most obviously sinful were the ones who repented; those who belonged to the religious power structure never came to be baptized... What could this mean??

One day it happened! There I was in the Jordan as usual, yelling my head off, calling people to repent and be ready for the coming of the Lord when something once again stirred deep within me. As soon

as I saw Him from a distance, God confirmed in my heart that this was HIM! I became uncharacteristically speechless. All I could manage was to turn to the people and say, ‘Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world...’ But then, beyond all belief, He came to me and asked to be baptized as well! I resisted – He had no sin to repent of – NO! – I should be baptized by Him! He gently insisted however that it should be done, as He said, ‘to fulfill all righteousness’. Wow! What an event that was! After He came up from the water there was that voice and the dove – it all seems surreal now, but it certainly made me realize without a shadow of a doubt that THIS was the Anointed Messiah of God; this IS the One who had come to redeem His people Israel!

Well, time went along after that. I continued my ministry of calling people to repentance, getting more and more bold in my old age (if you call 30 old!). My boldness reached even to King Herod. I knew in my heart that his deceitfulness in taking his brother’s wife, Herodias, was wrong and that it would in fact prevent him from seeing the glory of God and so I confronted him on it. He didn’t take to kindly to this – and Herodias was livid. Well, that’s why I’m in here, in fact. I have an ominous sense that if Herodias ever gets a chance she will have me for dinner...

So, as I mentioned earlier, from my dungeon here at Herod’s Hilton, I’d been hearing bits and pieces about the ministry of Jesus the Anointed One. For many of us Jews who repented and turned to see Him, He seems to be acting a little strange. We fully anticipate that He will be the King who will sit on the throne of David and rule over His people, but He certainly isn’t taking any giant strides toward such a position. This was causing me a great deal of anxiety as I had been so certain that He was the One but He doesn’t seem to be bringing the kingdom in the way that I expected! Is it possible that I had been deceived?? Could it be that He really was not from God, but an imposter? How could this be?? My anguish grew to a point where I knew I had to send an urgent question to Him – are you really the One, or should we look for another??

When my loyal friends came back with His answer, the denarii dropped, so to speak!! It was a remarkable moment for revelation! His words brought the words of the prophet Isaiah to life in my memory! I realized at that moment that I and my people had been so fixated on the political aspirations of the kingdom that we had missed totally the words of the prophets! Isaiah after all had said: *“Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.”* (Isa 35:5-6). This IS the Promised One; the

Messiah; the Anointed One of Yahweh who came to take away the sin of the world!! He has made Himself known. Praise His Name! Hallelujah!

To those who may read my ramblings from prison I urge you to pay attention to 2 realities. First, hear and know beyond any shadow of doubt that Jesus is the only One who can save you from your sins; His life and work are truly the watershed of human history; no-one like Him as ever existed in the history of mankind. Second, know and understand the role that repentance plays in your life. The lesson that God taught me in the desert continues today. Without repentance you cannot see or participate in the glory of God and receive His forgiveness.

But wait... Herod is calling for me. Something about a banquet going on right now and he needs my head for something or other...

For the glory of the Kingdom of God... John

Lessons to take home

1. Jesus is the watershed character of human history – don't miss Him!
 - a. The whole of human history may be divided into 2 sections – before Christ and after Christ. He IS the central character of Salvation History!
 - i. Luke continues to pound this lesson home as he records these stories
 - b. 2 phrases in our text help to emphasize this
 - i. *“Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.”* (v. 23)
 1. This is at the end of His reply message to our friend John and I believe it to be a very bold claim. He is saying here that if someone does not accept Him and His teachings that he or she will fall away...
 2. Jesus would later emphasize this idea with words like, “I am the Way the Truth and the Life, no-one comes to the Father except through Me”
 - ii. *“I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.”* (v. 28)
 1. Jesus gives high praise for John as the greatest of the prophets here – what does He mean when He talks about the least in the kingdom?

2. Jesus is making the claim that those who will enter into the kingdom of God by faith in Him are in a privileged position that all of the Old Testament prophets could only dream about! All of this comes back to His own identity as the Anointed One from God who comes to bring the Kingdom of God to earth in a new way!
- iii. The whole point of the ministry to John the Baptist was to wake people up to make sure that they didn't miss the reality of who Jesus really is and what He came to do!
 1. He woke them up by calling them to repentance...
2. Repentance is still key to life in the kingdom of God
 - a. Both John & Jesus announced the beginning of their ministry by saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand' (see Matt 3 & 4).
 - b. The saddest portion of our text today comes in the parenthetical verses (29-30)
 - i. *"All the people, even the tax collectors, when they heard Jesus' words, acknowledged that God's way was right, because they had been baptized by John. But the Pharisees and experts in the law **rejected God's purpose for themselves**, because they had not been baptized by John."*
 - c. Refusing to repent from sin and turn to God for forgiveness is equal to rejecting God's purpose for your life.
 - d. Let's apply this in 2 scenarios:
 - i. I don't want to presume that just because you are sitting in this auditorium just now that you are a follower of Jesus. Maybe you're still investigating the idea – we welcome you to do that!
 1. Jesus makes it clear as do his followers later on that unless we repent and receive forgiveness for our sins that we cannot enter the kingdom of God.
 2. And so, I would love to call you to consider making that initial step of repentance even this morning!
 3. There is absolutely nothing we can do to earn forgiveness from God. Even the ability to repent comes to us as a gracious gift from God.
 4. One of my favourite verses in the Bible is 2 Peter 3:9 which says, *"The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."*

- ii. If you are a follower of Jesus – I want to challenge you to consider that repentance is still key to living in the fullness of the kingdom of God.
1. We need to be careful not to misrepresent Scripture, so please listen carefully.
 2. I believe that when we come to Christ in the simplicity of faith and humbly repent of our sin and ask for His forgiveness and cleansing that He comes and does that for us! We don't need to keep on going back and receiving the gift of salvation over and over again!
 3. However, we know that we continue to live in our sinful bodies that have the possibility to be influenced and stained by the sinful world in which we still live.
 - a. To the extent that we allow sin to hide away in the dark corners of our lives, to that extent we do not experience the fullness of God kingdom.
 - b. We come back again to that wonderful picture in Revelation of Jesus standing and the door and knocking and saying – I want to come in and eat with you!
 - c. He wants to come into every area of our lives and live there with us and walk with us.
 - d. Paul calls us in 1 Corinthians 11 to examine ourselves before we take Communion in remembrance of Him.

Conclusion

Just before we move into a time of response in worship and singing, let us take a moment of silence to respond to what God may have said to your heart and mine... Let us ask the Holy Spirit of God to do His work which the Apostle John describes as 'conviction of sin'. What are those dark areas of our lives where we need to repent and invite the cleansing and healing power of Jesus to take over?

- In work or business – maybe it's the way you're treating your employees or your boss
- At home – maybe it's the way you're treating your parents; your siblings; your husband or wife
- In the secret places of your own heart – where have you been trapped by the lies of the world? Materialism? Sexual indulgences outside of the marriage vows?

Through repentance, let us clear the roadway of our lives so that we may see the Glory of God in its fullness!