

*What brought them out?*

Picture it in your mind's eye: a wilderness, a desert place out in the Jordan valley, not so very far from the hustle and bustle of the capital city of Jerusalem but another world altogether – bleak and barren and dry. And as you look you focus in on a wild figure out there, a man named John, and you hear his voice:

‘A voice crying out in the wilderness,  
‘Prepare the way of the Lord;  
Make his paths straight.  
Every valley shall be filled;  
and every mountain and hill shall be made low...

And if we had read on we would have found that crowds flocked to listen and to hear this message and to submit to his baptism. So picture them, converging on John from Jerusalem and from their far-flung villages, coming from far and wide, and the question we might ask is ‘what brought them out?’ What brought them to this strange preacher? What brought the crowds in such numbers?

Well, to answer that question I would suggest that there are three things we need to look at, three factors in this scene that require examination if we are to understand what was going on. And those three factors come under the headings of the man, the message, and the location.

So let's turn first to the man, to John the Baptist, this odd figure who confronts us. What do we need to know about him? Well, the important thing to look at here is the way he is introduced to us, the way Luke presents him. It sounds rather like a history lecture. ‘In the fifteenth year of the emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea...’, and then a list of names of obscure people and places we've never heard of. So what is all that about? Do we need all that boring detail? Well, the author Luke knows exactly what he is doing here because the fact is that this is how, typically, prophets are introduced. Prophets are frequently presented in terms of the politics and powers of their day. Go back to the beginning of the Book of the prophet Jeremiah, for example: ‘The word of the Lord came to him in the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah king of Amon, King of Judah...’ and so on. So Luke here is presenting John as a prophet, and that is significant because many of the Jews of Jesus' day considered that there hadn't been any prophets around for a

long, long time. Some thought that there hadn't been any prophets for over 400 years and they longed for the Word of God to be heard once again. So Luke is deliberately presenting John as a long awaited prophet, and that is why he comes quoting from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. Suddenly God's Word is coming alive again - ancient words are being given new life as they are launched upon the lips of John the Baptist. And that is one factor that brought the people out. News was getting around: the famine is ended! Out in the desert, the drought is over! Out in the wilderness the Word of God is sounding like rain on parched land!

So there is something compelling about this man. But what about his message? Well, his message was one of repentance: he 'proclaimed a baptism in token of repentance for the forgiveness of sins', we're told. Now that is worth pondering for a moment. Why would a message like that bring people out? Why would people flock to be told that they are sinners in need of repentance? Why would you flock to some weird tub-thumper banging on about sin? Isn't this a negative and a dreary message? Indeed isn't this the problem with religion generally, that it is obsessed with sin and guilt, and that is not good for us, especially grown up, sophisticated 21<sup>st</sup> century people like you and me?

Now, one of the problems here is that we have tended to work with too narrow an understanding of sin. We have tended to over-emphasise what we might call personal sin, what I as a good Presbyterian was brought up with, the knowledge that before God I was a miserable sinner whose very best deeds were as filthy, soiled rags. Well, I don't think we find that too helpful today, but I would suggest that anyway there is much more to John's message than a tilt at personal sin. You see, when John speaks of valleys being raised and mountains lowered and crooked paths made straight he is quoting from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 40, where the Jewish people are pictured leaving exile in Babylon. And Babylon is a symbol of captivity. It's a symbol of an oppressive system that enslaves people and that denies them their true humanity. And I would suggest that the people who flocked to be baptised by John were people who had a sense that somehow they were living in Babylon all over again, and they wanted out. They were disillusioned with Babylon and they wanted release. I suspect that the crowds that came were disillusioned about a taxation system that burdened them and squeezed them dry. I suspect that they resented a tax regime calculated to boost the powerful elite centred

round Jerusalem and who were in hock to the Roman occupying powers. I imagine that many of the crowd were disillusioned about religion and the way it was practiced and the crushing burden it could easily become. I suspect that many of them had a sense somehow that things weren't working – at least not working for them – and that this was Babylon revisited and that it was time for a change. And it was within that wider picture that people would have understood their own personal sin. Those people had a sense of what we might call structural sin. They had a sense of a system that was not delivering, and within that broader frame they became aware of their own personal failings, all the ways in which they contributed to that system, all the ways they colluded with Babylon, all the ways they reinforced it – and the need therefore for a fresh start for their own lives.

This was the power of baptism. For you to enter the baptismal waters was to imagine that life could be lived differently, that life did not have to be like this, that God wanted things otherwise. For you to enter the waters of baptism was to feel the death of an old, oppressive order of which you were a part and that wasn't working and to sense something new stirring in the depths. For you to join that procession that went out to be baptised by John was to enter a procession that was taking leave of Babylon, to enter a land where crooked paths were made straight and where mountains of injustice were levelled and valleys of deprivation were filled. So repentance was not just a case of putting on sackcloth and ashes. Repentance was a joyful commitment to new possibilities. It was a realisation that the breeze that was rippling the surface of the waters was a herald of change and that you wanted to be part of that.

So that's the man and that's the message. What about the location, where all this is happening? Well of course the scandal is that this new thing, the prophet with the Word on his lips and his message of repentance is taking place not in the capital city, not in the temple precincts, not in the corridors of power, but out in the wilderness. Think of it! Sin was being dealt with and forgiven out there in the back of beyond! How come? There were well established protocols for dealing with sin, and they were all centred on the temple. The temple was the place, after all, where sacrifices were offered, and that was the priests' responsibility. That was their business. Who was this upstart claiming to absolve sin in the muddy waters of the Jordan? But no. Here is God's power-base – outside the establishment. Here is God's base camp, and it's far from the power structures and the politics represented by that dull

history lesson at the beginning of the chapter – Tiberius and Pilate and Herod and Philip and Anna and Caiaphas. These people represent the empire. These people represent Babylon and captivity. But John is leading the crowds through the waters and out of Babylon, along a highway through the desert.

So, to return to the beginning. Why did the crowds come? What brought them out? Well, get the picture. Out there the Word of God is being uttered and heard. And out there sins are being forgiven as people are renewed with a fresh start. And out there the world is being re-imagined. Out there the crowds catch a vision born out of disillusionment, the sense that things are not working, and they hear the proclamation of something new. And all this in preparation for the coming of the Christ.

Of course, John's ministry out in the desert did not last. If we read to the end of chapter 3 of Luke we find that on account of John's preaching King Herod threw him into prison. And so the crowds dispersed and the voice was silenced. Babylon bounced back: reasserted its grip. Babylon shut down the highway in the desert. But so what? What had been done out there could not be undone. Something new had been imagined and could not be erased. Preparation had been made for the coming one. There had been a witness.

So to us today and the question – what brings us out? What brings us here? Well, this morning, in Advent 2015, is it not easy to feel the sense of disillusionment that the crowds felt in John's day? Is it not easy to feel that somehow things aren't working? As we meet here this morning the world is terrorised by violence, and it's gearing up for an escalation of the war in Syria, and world leaders wrestle with climate change in Paris. Is it so hard to sense that this is not how it's meant to be? Is it so hard to sign up for the message of radical change that John announced?

Of course, today the crowds don't flock. But we come apart to listen for God's word, like those in John's day. Like them, we come, yearning for a fresh start. Like them we come longing to re-imagine the world as God would have it, and to re-commit ourselves to that vision. This is the task of the church in Advent and at all times. This is the church's witness. This is how we prepare the way of the Lord who is coming. Amen.