

16 December 2018

Zephaniah 3.14-20

Luke 3.7-18

A Call to Action

For so many people Christmas is a busy time of year.

So I am slightly reluctant to preach a sermon entitled 'A call to action.'

But let me get this straight right from the start. A call to action is not the same as a call to frantic busyness. This is not so much about how much *more* we should do as it is about a reflection on the kind of lives we should lead in response to the coming of Jesus.

The crowds who flocked to hear John the Baptist instinctively knew that repentance and baptism could only be the beginning of something. When they accepted baptism, this was not the goal of their living, but the beginning of a new way of life. So they asked 'What then shall we do?'

And John gives them a flavour of what it would mean if they were to take seriously the call of the coming God on their lives.

1. This is a call to action for the repentant

This is not where John begins in calling people into a new relationship with God. John's primary message is not a call to action but a call to repentance. The action he calls for comes as a consequence of that repentance.

If we are bothered or anxious about our relationship with God then we are starting in the wrong place if we think we can change things by amending our actions. Our relationship with God always begins with God ... and discovering God's grace and love, his acceptance and ready welcome. It begins with God's action and not ours.

Neither at the beginning, nor in the course of our relationship with God can we ever 'work our way into God's good books' – or 'work our way' back into relationship with God. It's a common temptation in all spheres of life that when

things go wrong we just need to put in extra effort, work a little harder at it ... and things will turn our right.

With God ALWAYS, the place to begin ... and begin again and again ... is with that open-hearted and open-handed response of repentance.

In part, this is the point John is making when he talks about God being able to make sons of Abraham from stones. He is saying that if we are sons of Abraham it's not because of anything we have done, or because of some inherent privilege. It is because of the miracle of God's grace.

This call to action is not about establishing our relationship with God. It is much more about living out the consequences of that relationship. We are in a relationship with God forged out of God's grace and our acceptance of that grace through repentance: how do we now live?

It is a call to action in response to God's action in our lives in Jesus.

2. This is a call to action out of fruitful lives

John's charge to his followers is to 'Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.'

This image of fruitful living is one which keeps on echoing through the pages of Scripture.

It is found in the Old Testament – John picks it up here – we find it on the lips of Jesus ... and Paul picks it up when speaking about the fruit of the Spirit in our lives.

It is an encouragement to us to live lives that make a difference in our world – but to live lives that make a difference in a way that is consistent with all that we know of God.

But it is the organic nature of fruitfulness that always strikes me – fruits grow organically – they are not produced by some feat of extraordinary effort or ingenuity. There is something natural about the way they grow.

If we want a plant to be fruitful, we have to do all that we can in tending that plant, to ensure that it is healthy. A healthy plant will produce an abundance of fruit.

If this activity that we are looking for is really about us bearing fruit, then in order for us to be as fruitful as we can, we shouldn't just be attending to doing one or two things differently, or doing some things in addition to what we are doing, we should be attending to the healthiness of our lives ...

... and I don't mean here principally our physical healthiness. I mean the health of our relationship with God, the health of our relationship with ourselves, and the health of our relationships with others.

Because this is about fruitfulness, the call to action shouldn't actually focus just on what we are doing, but much, much more on who we are.

Are our lives well fed and well nourished spiritually?

Where are we drawing our nourishment from?

Have we stopped drawing from the wells of grace and love that are found when we spend time with God and seek his help and his presence?

In turning in repentance to God, and accepting his unconditional love and grace, have we allowed his grace and acceptance to change and transform the way in which we see ourselves. Do we have a healthy grasp of who we are within God's grace? Or are we living with an ungraceful and so an unhealthy view of ourselves in which we continue to think that we are unloveable or worthless, or an imposter or unforgiveable?

If we have an unhealthy view of ourselves, that will always come out in our actions.

If we are always acting out of an inner place of anxiety rather than an inner place of peace, that will always somehow be reflected in our actions and influence.

A call to fruitful action will always be a call to attend to who we are as much as it is a call to attend to what we do.

So when John gives some specific examples, he gives examples of actions that are the overflow of a character that reflects the character of God.

"The man who has two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same."

God is the God who gives and gives, and never fails to share of himself. Whenever, wherever we have the opportunity then we should live that same life of generosity.

The tax collectors ask what they should do. John replies, 'Don't collect any more than you are required to.'

This, of course, is in a context where the Roman authorities had outsourced the collection of taxes to the highest bidder, so the tax collector was able to collect the Roman taxes and then add on a little (or more than a little) for themselves. The Romans were only concerned that they received what they were owed.

God is the God of radical integrity, who can always be trusted and is always true to himself and his promises. Wherever and whenever we have the opportunity then we should live out that same radical integrity even when it breaks cultural norms and expectations.

And the soldier likewise, "What should we do?" "Don't extort money; don't accuse people falsely; be content with your pay."

Soldiers were authority figures. They held power and were expected to use and abuse their power.

God is the all-powerful one who never abuses his power, who never puts people down, but always builds them up. Wherever and whenever we have the opportunity then we should live out that same way of empowering others.

3. This is a call to action that is about earthing our repentance in the ordinary and the everyday

It is incredible how ordinary and everyday these examples are that John gives.

First of all, although John is living this rather odd, off-the-grid lifestyle in the wilderness, he realises that this is *his* call and no one else's. He doesn't say to these people, 'Come and join me in the wilderness!'

No, he sends them back to where they are living and tell them to get on with living their lives of repentance back in the ordinary, everyday world.

He doesn't even say to the tax-collectors and soldiers that they have to leave their jobs. Just that they have got to live differently in the jobs they are already doing.

There are too many times in the church when we glamourise the call to discipleship and give the impression that only those who have made decisions to up-root themselves, give up their jobs, their homes, their families have made the ultimate radical decision. And that everyone are 'also-rans'.

But actually for most people radical discipleship has to be lived out in the ordinary, everyday world. It will never mean moving house, changing job, or taking a cut in salary or prospects.

But actually this is the norm, and this is where radical discipleship has to be put into action for most followers of Jesus.

And this isn't about second-rate, or second-order discipleship. This is where the rubber hits the road, and this is where radical transforming discipleship is lived out in the world.

And this was John's focus. Calling people into the wilderness to enable them to think again, but then sending them back into the ordinary and everyday.

Fruitful discipleship is not about imagining what we would do if ...

.... would we be willing to uproot ourselves if God called us to serve him the other side of the world, or to go and live alongside the homeless and the poor

.... or how would we respond if we were faced with persecution for our faith ...

Faithful discipleship is about accepting where we are right here and now with what we have right here and now and asking how do I live in a way that is consistent with the character and ways of God that I have come to know in Jesus.

The examples that are used here are fascinating.

"the man who has got two tunics ..."

This is aimed quite strategically. Most people – the peasants – would probably only have had one set of clothes .

But John doesn't speak to the super-rich – "If anyone has got two homes ..."

This is aimed at someone who is just a bit better off than many of those around.

Generosity is about being generous with *whatever* we have, *whoever* we are, *wherever* we happen to be and to live and to work.

I heard a report recently that many homeless charities are having to turn people away who have volunteered to help them over Christmas. There has been something of an upsurge of people wanting to use their time at Christmas to help others.

This has to be applauded.

What the homeless charities have said is that it would be wonderful if these people would be willing to volunteer at other times of the year ... because often they are struggling to find volunteers to keep their doors open.

This call to action is not to do something special and additional over Christmas. Rather it is a call to develop lives wherever we happen to be, whoever we happen to be, whatever we happen to be doing, that put into action the fruits of repentance in our everyday, ordinary living.

That is radical discipleship.