

Pointing the Way

John 1:19-34

Suppose someone gave you an important message for me – an urgent message. Let's say the message was that I was to ring Kevin Rudd before 5pm. You received this message at 2pm, and it took you nearly three hours to actually find me. But eventually, at 4:55pm, you found me up on Mount Panorama – sitting there in a chair, with a mobile on my lap. You delivered your message:

You must ring Kevin Rudd before 5pm. It's a matter of life and death.

What would you expect me to do? Pick up the phone and ring Kevin Rudd. How'd you feel if:

- I started complimenting you on the fine cut and marvellous colour coordination of your clothes?
- I commented on your magnificent diction and your pleasant Scottish accent?
- I praised you for the courteous and humble way in which you delivered your message?

I suspect you'd think I'd lost the plot somewhat.

Sometimes that's how people treat John the Baptist. He plays a fairly prominent role in this part of the Bible we're looking at this morning. Some people spend so much time analysing who John the Baptist was or what his character was like or whether the locusts he ate were insects or fruit and they forget the whole purpose of John's existence. They forget why John has a prominent role in this passage. John's purpose was to direct people to Jesus – pure and simple.

In the verses we looked at last week, John the Baptist

popped up a couple of times – verses 6 to 8 and verse 15. Both references mention the fact that John bore witness to Jesus. This passage we're thinking about this morning gives more details of the witness John bore.

I should warn you this can get confusing because we're talking about two Johns: John the Baptist and the apostle John. Whenever you see the name John in John's gospel, it refers to John the Baptist – for the apostle John never refers to himself by name. However, I'll be using the name John to refer to both and I'll try to make it clear which one I'm talking about each time.

John Identifies himself

John (the apostle) gives us two incidents from John the Baptist's life. The first one, in verses 19 to 28, records a conversation he had with a delegation sent by the Jewish religious leaders.

Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ".

They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?"

He said, "I am not".

"Are you the Prophet?"

He answered, "No".

Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord'."

Now some Pharisees who had been sent questioned

him, "Why then do you baptise if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

"I baptise with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie".

This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

Now, if you've read the gospels before, you'll have a fairly negative view about the Jewish religious leaders – and rightly so. They don't come off looking too good. Thus, we face the danger of reading that negative view into this passage. But I don't think we should do that.

What's going on here? A young man suddenly appeared out at the Jordan River – seemed to blow in from the desert. He hasn't been to any of the approved colleges. He doesn't have the proper accreditation. He's dressed up like a prophet. He preaches like a prophet. He attracts large crowds of people. He says some fairly strong things and calls people to be baptised. He creates quite a disturbance. So, the religious leaders investigate what's going on. It's right they do that. They'd be irresponsible if they didn't investigate.

When people make religious claims, it's right to check them out. We mustn't accept this modern nonsense of thinking that one religion's as good as another – that all religions have a piece of the truth and end up in the same place. That in itself's a religious claim. It shouldn't be accepted without checking it out. Is it a true claim? Is it a reasonable claim? The major world religions straight out contradict each other at so many points it just doesn't

make sense to simply accept that idea without question. And yet so many parrot it off as if it solves every religious issue you can raise.

These religious leaders ask John the Baptist several questions about his identity. They aren't the sort of questions we'd ask today, but they're excellent questions for first-century Jews. Each question is based on certain expectations from their reading of the Old Testament. They have to do with what God promised about their future.

First, they ask whether John the Baptist was the *Christ*, or *Messiah*. The two terms have the same meaning: *Christ* comes into our English language from the Greek word; *Messiah* comes into our English language from the Hebrew term. Both refer to the *Anointed One* – the One who's God's special messenger.

Why anointed? What's so special about that? In Old Testament times, priests, prophets and kings were anointed to their position – perhaps not always, but at least some of them were. The anointing signified they were set aside to the particular position and they were consecrated in that position by God.

Towards the end of the Old Testament, the prophets started talking about a special Anointed One – a Messiah, a Christ. People picked up on this. They developed various expectations about what God would do for them when this Messiah came. Those expectations blossomed during the four hundred years between the end of the Old Testament and John the Baptist. The Jews expected the Messiah. They didn't always agree on what the Messiah

would be like or what he'd do:

- some anticipated a priestly Messiah;
- others expected a king Messiah from David's line;
- still others looked for a military leader in the style of Rambo.

And so the list went on. What's common to them all was the expectation of someone who'd be the Messiah and who'd do great things for Israel. So this delegation asks John the Baptist if he's the Messiah.

Secondly, they ask him if he's Elijah. In Malachi 4:5, right at the end of the Old Testament, God says:

See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.

Thus, people expected Elijah to reappear. They weren't too clear on how this would work out – but they expected it to be significant. For some, they thought John the Baptist may be this Elijah. The way he dressed reminds them of what they read of Elijah in the Old Testament. And so this delegation asks John if he's Elijah.

Thirdly, they ask him if he's *the* Prophet. In Deuteronomy 18:15, way back in the early parts of the Old Testament, Moses wrote:

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.

And again in verse 18 – this time God speaking:

I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him.

Since that time, God had given Israel many prophets. We read about many of them in the Old Testament. They spoke God's word to God's people. Often, they told God's people what they were doing wrong. They called them to get their act together and treat God properly. So there's this long line of prophets. But many thought there'd be one great prophet who'd come – *the* Prophet. And so they ask John the Baptist about that as well.

John denies he's any of these three figures. He says he's not the Messiah; he's not Elijah; he's not *the* Prophet. The delegation's understandably reluctant to go back to their bosses with an answer that just says who John isn't. They want to identify who he is. Does he have authority to do what he's doing? Should he be stopped? And so they ask who he thinks he is. What's he got to say for himself? John replies in the words of Isaiah 40:3. He claims to be *a voice in the desert*.

When Isaiah first wrote this prediction, he's talking about coming back from Babylon. The Jews treated God very badly. God sent them prophet after prophet to tell them how badly they were doing. The prophets warned them that, if they didn't get their act together, God would kick them out of their land. He'd send them as captives to another land. The people didn't get their act together and God did kick them out of the land. But Isaiah promises this won't be the end of the story. After their time of exile, God will bring them back. God will ease their way through the desert road system between Babylon and Palestine.

Yet, even in the later chapters of Isaiah, this return from their exile serves as a model for an event far greater than

a mere geographical return to Jerusalem. By the end of Isaiah, he predicts something far bigger than national Israel and geographical Palestine. It's this connection that's taken up by John the Baptist. He sees himself as this voice who's preparing the way for the Coming One.

Now, we've just jumped all over the Old Testament and looked very quickly and maybe too briefly at a whole range of ideas and Jewish expectations. If you're not very familiar with the Old Testament, your head may very well be spinning. So, let me summarise it all in two main points.

- First, the Jews had high expectations about someone God would send – someone who'd do great things for them. John the Baptist suddenly appears and causes quite a stir. It's natural to ask: Are you the expected one? That's what this delegation's doing.
- Secondly, John the Baptist says: No, he's not the expected one – but they need to get ready urgently because the expected one's about to arrive. John's job is to identify this expected one when he turns up. That's who he is. That's what he's doing.

That's the first incident.

John Identifies Jesus

The second incident the apostle John records from John the Baptist's life tells us about John identifying the expected one. John's God-given role was to prepare the way for this expected one. This shows him doing just that. Verse 29:

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, "A

man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me'. I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel."

Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him, except that the One who sent me to baptise with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptise with the Holy Spirit'. I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God".

Put yourself in the crowd's shoes for a minute. Think of the great expectations you've got. You've heard the Old Testament promises. Those promises speak of something great God's going to do through this expected one. Those expectations have been building up for hundreds of years. They've gained extra force through years of submission to foreign rulers – first the Greeks, then the Romans. You long for freedom. You long for self-rule. You long for more power for Israel. You long for Israel to become a major power in world affairs. Surely that's what God's promises are about.

John the Baptist appears and causes quite a stir. You've gone out to investigate. Your hopes are high. You hear him promise the expected one's already around. He's about to be identified. And then John points to Jesus and you think: This is it. This is what I'm waiting for. And John says: *Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.* How would you feel? Disappointed? Deflated? Ripped off?

You're looking for something really important. You're

looking for peace and prosperity. You're looking for greatness as a nation. You're looking for the Lion who'd at the very least take away the Roman legions. And John the Baptist says:

Look folks. He's the one you're all expecting. I know He looks rather ordinary. He doesn't look anything special on the outside – no different from anyone else. But this is the One God's sent. He's the Lamb of God.

The lamb spoke to them of what went on in the temple at Jerusalem. There were plenty of lambs there. They got sacrificed on the altar day after day.

- They reminded the people of their sins.
- They reminded the people their sins were serious in God's sight. People have a tendency to downplay their wrongdoing – to treat it as less serious than God treats it; to treat it as if it's normal and doesn't really matter.
- The lambs remind them otherwise. Their sins deserve God's punishment – and that punishment's not just a slap on the wrist. Sin's not in the trivial misdemeanour category; it's in the capital offence category – all of it.

God gave them this sacrificial system to remind them of that. But, in itself, it wasn't sufficient to deal with their sins. How could the death of a mere animal make up for an act of human rebellion?

John the Baptist says of Jesus: *Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.*

- He doesn't just remind us of sin and the seriousness of sin; He takes it away.
- And he doesn't do it just for Israel; He does it for the whole world.

Do you see how important this is? Maybe you've got a view of religion that says: Religion should do something important for me.

- It should make me successful.
- It should provide me with wealth.
- It should give me an advantage over others.
- It should help me get ahead in the world.

What good is this business of taking away sins? How's that help me deal with what I want in life?

You have to see the bigger picture. This life's just the entrée. Physical death brings it to an end – but it doesn't bring you to an end. You will still face God's judgment. God will demand an accounting from you. He will pass sentence. The result is either:

- eternal life – what Jesus calls heaven; or
- eternal death – what Jesus calls hell.

They are the only two options.

The decision's made on the basis of your sin. This is why God thought it important to give ancient Israel a continual reminder of its seriousness. What's sin?

- At one level, it's all the wrong things we do – the lies, the theft, the cheating, the immorality, the lashing out at others, the gossip, the pride, the lust, and so on. They're bad things – but most of us can always come up with worse things we haven't done. And so we find it easy to think the bad things we do aren't really all that bad. We think what we've done is only in the misdemeanour category. But they're only symptoms of a far deeper disease.
- The real disease is our rebellion against God. We don't want to submit to God's rightful rule. We

don't want Him ruling over us. We want to be our own bosses. We want to be autonomous. We want to set up our own little kingdoms where we can rule ourselves without bothering about our Creator and what He wants and what He says. In human terms, we'd call it treason or sedition. It's very serious. We've declared rebellion against our rightful Ruler.

Can you now see how important it is to have someone who can take away sin? What's the might of the Roman armies compared with this? What's a million-dollar bank account compared with this? Can anything be more important?

The second thing John the Baptist says of Jesus is: *He will baptise with the Holy Spirit*. Now remember, John's been plunging people into the Jordan River. He says it's by way of preparation.

- He warns them God's about to act.
- He challenges them to get ready for that by putting away their wrong behaviour.

And, as an indication that's their desire, he baptises them. But he says: That's nothing compared to what this man will do. He'll baptise you with God's Spirit. In other words, He'll plunge you into a new relationship with God.

Again, it goes back to God's promises in the Old Testament. God tells His people they're doing the wrong thing – He does that time and time again. Why does He have to keep telling them that? Why can't they get their act together? God says it's a heart issue. Deep down, their hearts are self-centred – not God-centred. They need a heart transplant. In Ezekiel 36:25-27, God promises this:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be

clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

John the Baptist says: That's what Jesus is going to do. He'll remove your sin. He'll immerse you in God's Spirit. It's a package deal.

The Messenger or the Message

So, will you pay attention to the messenger or to the message? Some would tell you the important thing about this passage is John the Baptist's humility. He didn't push himself forward – He pointed to Jesus. We should learn to be humble just like that.

In my younger days, I used to play cricket. I even got a few trophies in the process. Suppose I had the task of introducing Don Bradman.

- If I did that by talking at length about my own cricket exploits, people would think me arrogant.
- If I spoke about Don Bradman's exploits and not my own would anyone think me humble? I doubt it. The difference between Bradman and me is so vast – why would I focus on me?

And so with John the Baptist. The difference between him and Jesus is so great that you only want to focus on Jesus.

Don't get me wrong. John the Baptist is a true prophet. And I think John the Baptist was humble – and humility's a good and godly quality to cultivate. But, if you go away from this passage thinking it's all about being

humble, you've missed the point. You'd be focusing on the messenger rather than his message. John the Baptist would have failed. John the apostle would have failed too – because he wrote this so you'd believe in Jesus.

As we saw in last week's passage, Jesus is *the Word become flesh*. This is God become man. This is true revelation. You must pay attention to Him. You ignore Him to your own peril. From John the Baptist, we learn more of what Jesus came to do.

- He came to take away sin – that is, He came to take away that which will condemn you to hell when you stand before God's court.
- He came to baptise in the Spirit – that is, He came to change you on the inside so that you'll increasingly desire to live in submission to God.

He came to give people life – true life – life as God intended when He created us in the first place.

The question that remains is: Will you take Jesus' offer? We haven't got very far into the apostle John's account of Jesus yet – and so we haven't dealt with very much of the evidence John offers. You may feel you still have to look at the rest of that evidence before you decide Jesus is who John claims. But here at the outset, you can see clearly what the claim is. It's a big claim. It's not the sort of claim you can ignore. If this is true, you can't turn your back on it. You owe it to yourself to check it out seriously.