

He's wearing what?

ARTHUR DALEY

Would you buy a used car off this man? "Only one careful lady owner, lovely runner. No money back guarantee. Warranty free purchase. Sold as seen." We usually like to avoid dodgy salesmen don't we? Arthur Daley was a character with a certain reputation and was dressed to match.

JOE ROOT

Here's an advert for a modern car sales company. This company knows we don't trust used car salesmen, so what do they do? They front themselves using celebrities, such as Joe Root, England cricketer and well-known good guy.

JTB

So would you buy a used car off *this* guy? Nutter! Never. He's the sort of guy that you don't want to bump into in the street is he?

JTB IN CHURCH

So what if he came into the church. How would we react? I know we welcome anyone – but dressed like that? I once read that as a test for his new congregation a Pastor once dressed up as a tramp and went to his smartly dressed new church on a Sunday morning. No-one recognised the Undercover Pastor, so the disguise worked! The stewards offered him a seat out of the way, but no-one went and sat anywhere near him or greeted him. They looked at him disapprovingly. How could anyone come into the house of the Lord looking like that? They did wonder where their Pastor was though. It came to the time for the sermon and the worship leader said, "and now our Pastor will come up and share God's word." I think their faced may have looked like this!

SHOCKED

I was brought up in a church where the norm was to dress up on Sunday as most people my age were. It's less the case now, but we scan till judge people by their appearance, and as Christians trying to reach a lost world, we'll often try to conform to cultural and moral standards around us to communicate God's word. That has always been true. So when people like this appear, trying to reach others we say..

TITLE

And he's dressed like that? That's no way to deal with people. You can't do that. It's outrageous. You'll put them off. This was the described appearance of John the Baptist, easily the New testament's worst dressed evangelist! Then he opens his mouth to speak to the people who had come to visit him and to our modern ears, it doesn't seem to get any better: 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.' Nice.

John the Baptist was everything you'd imagine an evangelist not to be. He should have been a total turn off. But it was quite the reverse. So...

WHY WAS JOHN THE BAPTIST'S MINISTRY SO EFFECTIVE?

Rather than driving people away, people actually went into the wilderness to hear him. We had the answer last week. He was chosen and anointed by God; filled with the Holy Spirit. My Pentecostal friends would say that he had the anointing. That's a good way of putting it. When one speaks and acts in the power of God, people sit up and take notice! And the well dressed, well educated, respectable religious leaders of the time could see this and were confused because he was everything that conventional wisdom and teaching said that a man of God *shouldn't* be. Here's a clip from a video of John's version of today's story.

VIDEO CLIP

WHY WAS JOHN'S MINISTRY SO EFFECTIVE?

From our passage this morning I can identify three other things which made John's ministry so powerful.

HE WAS CALLED AND PREPARED HIMSELF BEFORE GOD

The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Luke 3:2-3

John knew from his youngest memory that he was called by God to be a great prophet and was filled with the Holy Spirit from birth. He consecrated himself to God and lived in the wilderness as an ascetic, living in poverty and communing with God. Our call may not be as dramatic as John's and it is possible to find and commune with God wherever and whenever, but the most important thing is that we recognise we are ALL called and that we spend time with God and allow His Spirit to work in us and through us. We all are called but we must all be prepared to allow the Spirit to work in us, whatever the cost may be and whatever that may involve.

We are coming up to thinking of what our next Pastor should be like. Most churches ask for a pastor to have evangelism skills, to take the church forward in mission and engaging with the community. In my experience, most ministers with a proven record in bringing people to Christ, are unique characters – men and women who think out of the box and are very unconventional as far as most churches would be concerned. My attitude to this is that if we are presented with someone who has a record of leading people to Christ, then seriously consider them and don't ask how they may fit with us, but how we may fit with them, and the work the Spirit is doing through them.

That said, for now, if we want to reach out and bring people to Christ, we won't do it by being conventional. We've done conventional and we are where we are. Think out of the box, because that's where the Holy Spirit is leading us I believe!

HE PREACHED TRUTH, RIGHTEOUSNESS AND JUSTICE

John didn't mince his words with the people that came to hear him. This is how The Message puts them.

2 SLIDES

When crowds of people came out for baptism because it was the popular thing to do, John exploded: "Brood of snakes! What do you think you're doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to deflect God's judgment? It's your life that must change, not your skin. And don't think you can pull rank by claiming Abraham as 'father.' Being a child of Abraham is neither here nor there—children of Abraham are a dime a dozen. God can make children from stones if he wants. What counts is your life. Is it green and flourishing? Because if it's deadwood, it goes on the fire." Luke 3:7-9 (The Message)

That's tough talk. His call was to repent – to turn their lives around and follow what God requires from them.

On specifics, he dealt with issues of basic integrity and justice:

Helping those in need: *'Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.'*

Not cheating: To tax collectors -*'Don't collect any more than you are required to'*

Acting justly: To soldiers (we don't know whether these were Roman or local militia) - *'Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely – be content with your pay.'*

John's message connected with people, not because it was an easy listen, but that it was true and contrasted greatly with the corruption of the Jewish leaders and their compliance with corrupt Roman provincial government and even more corrupt client regime of the Herodian family.

Preaching that meets people's deepest needs doesn't have to be sugar coated, just communicated correctly in a Spirit-led and empowered way.

John spoke truth, stood for integrity and justice and it got him arrested and slammed into prison. In these times, it is even more important to be people of integrity and speak out against injustice, particularly the injustices thrown up by the Covid-19 pandemic which has magnified even more the inequalities of our own society.

It goes to the heart of the way we do mission and project the Good News into our community because mission doesn't necessarily make us popular because it means we have to tell the truth. How this challenges me – and I give this to you as a piece of thinking out loud rather than a definitive statement – is that should our activities in the community project what jolly nice people we are, or focus on challenging others with the truth of God's word, even if that makes people uncomfortable. One of the dangers of mission that shows others how nice we are by benefiting others is that in the end either the focus will be on us, or others will just think of us as people who provide them with cheap or free stuff.

John the Baptist never focussed on himself, all his preaching activities, his baptisms and his discussions pointed people to someone coming after him – and that was Jesus.

HE POINTED TO CHRIST

John's life and ministry had one purpose – to prepare and then present Jesus to them:

I baptise you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.'

Both our church and others in Felixstowe as well as churches up and down the land all have mission that engages with our communities. Mission is good and it to be encouraged and commended. But ultimately, what is its purpose – to engage people with Jesus Christ – not with church, not with us; Jesus. And if our ministry and mission does not produce fruit in forgiven, changed lives, then we've not passed the John the Baptist test. We have not completed our mission to make disciples of all nations etc.

John may have looked weird, sounded terse or whatever, but in having Jesus as a focus, they knew he was speaking truth and the flocked out of Jerusalem to hear him.

CHALLENGE

Do we want to grow as a church? I hope so. Then our activities and our message needs to be Christ focussed, it needs to display the utmost integrity and truth, it needs to be straight down the line. That in itself won't make much of a difference to be honest. I've heard many hard hitting sermons over the years, that have caused offence and indignation rather than changed lives. Usually because the first bit is missing – that we need to operate as called and anointed people who are walking with God. Unless we walk with Him, we're not going anywhere anytime soon. And that's our challenge today. Do we want to see changed lives? Do we want to see loved ones, neighbours etc. come to Christ. It starts when we come before God and start to speak and act in the Spirit. It happens when we speak truth and love justice, and people come to Christ when they are presented with Him. Is that where we want to go as a church – then let's commit ourselves afresh to the Lord. Let's pray.

CONFESSION

For Reflection & Discussion

Read Luke 3:1-20

1. *Read Isaiah 40:3-5.* Apart from fulfilling the prophecy literally, what were the advantages for John's mission by being "a voice crying in the wilderness?"
2. Why is "having the anointing" so important when we do the work of God, or when we are seeking for someone for leadership or other important ministry roles?
3. When is "unconventional" right and "conventional" wrong? Who determines what is conventional anyway? What role does the Holy Spirit have in conventionality?
4. Why is truth, righteousness and justice so important in the message and lifestyle we should seek to project? What if that makes us unpopular? If we are, is that a problem with the word of God (the message) or the messenger?
5. *Look at Romans 10:8-14.* Why is speaking Good News so important? Can we really function as Christians or Church without Jesus as the ultimate focus? How can we ensure that we keep that focus?