

Spiritual Division (Luke 3:7-18)

It is often said that our society is increasingly divided. But what are the divisions that really matter? John spoke to a very divided society, but challenged their views of which divisions mattered.

- **A Divided Society**

It is often said that our society is becoming increasingly divided.

There have been divisions over Brexit, division between the metropolitan elite and the rest of the country, divisions over how to respond to the Pandemic and so on.

A lot of the present division is caused by social media, which tends to create an echo chamber. It analyses the posts you like to look at and the friends and people you like to hear from and gives you more of it. The result is you only hear one set of opinions and ideas and rarely engage with opposing views. Also, the nature of engaging with people online is distant, so that people are much quicker to be rude or judgemental in their comments than they would be if they were face to face with a real human being.

The result is an increasingly, 'them' and 'us' outlook on the world, that in many ways is unhelpful.

Of course there is nothing new in that. People have always found ways to divide themselves from others, whether through nationalism, racism and even religion.

That was true of the time of John the Baptist and Jesus, perhaps even more true. For the people of the day, the division was between Jew and Gentile, between the people of God and the pagans, between the oppressed and occupied nation of Israel and the oppressive Roman authorities and their puppet kings. This would be a division that within 40 years would boil over into a bloody and deadly civil war.

Into this divided society, steps John the Baptist. His preaching and baptism in a way are all about division. He called for a new alignment, but not an alignment along, political, racial or even in one sense religious grounds, but in a more fundamental spiritual way. This new alignment or division, was a call to a change in life, which was both profoundly radical, but also deeply peaceful!

God's Children not Satan's Brood - vs. 7-8

First of all John called on people to be truly God's children and not Satan's brood!

Luke's account of John's preaching begins, "You brood of vipers!"

You might think this sounds deeply offensive - and you would be correct.

Brood means children, or offspring, whilst to Jewish people of course, vipers as snakes are related to Satan or the devil who tempted Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

But, John uses this offensive language not primarily to upset people, but to call them to a deeper and more radical realignment. This becomes clearer in verse 8, where he says to them:

"Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our Father.'"

Those coming to him, were Jews by background and would have seen themselves as God's people because of their racial heritage, because they were Jewish. That is the division that mattered to them. John, though is saying to them, that is not the division

that matters! Just because they are descended from Abraham does not mean that spiritually they belong to Satan. They must stop relying on their racial identity and realign their spiritual identity away from the attitudes and ways of Satan and back towards the way of God. That is the kind of repentance that John was calling for. Only then will you become truly like Abraham and become his spiritual children.

John goes on to say, that God can raise up children of Abraham out of stones. This is already an indication that God's call to a new spiritual alignment is not just for Jewish people, it is for anyone who comes and repents. Anyone who chooses to align afresh with God. Such an attitude is the first stage in breaking down the human divisions that existed at the time.

- Today, the world's divisions are different and yet John's challenge is the same. We can think of ourselves as one of God's people because of historic identity: 'I was christened,' 'we've always been church of England', 'I was brought up as a Christian.'

John's message is a challenge to us, where is our heart spiritually aligned? Are we truly seeking to be God's people or are we simply resting on a kind of Christian identity that we have inherited, but never truly grasped in our hearts?

Christ's People not Cult People - vs. 15-17

Many people in this country are perhaps wary of such a call. It feels too much like being called into a kind of cult. Indeed, religious cults do exist and often use a form of Christianity as a way of controlling and manipulating people. Cults seek to separate people off from the rest of the world and are often focussed on a human leader.

But as Christians we are not called to be separate from the world and our true head is always Christ, no simple human leader.

The people of John's time were longing for God to send the Messiah or the Christ, the one who they thought would be God's special king to save them. Listening to John they began to think that maybe John was this Messiah. John's response is clear: "It's not me!" But what he says about the one to come after him, who we know to be Jesus is really important.

- **Christ's Authority (John's Future / Our present) - vs. 16**

Firstly, John is clear that Jesus is someone with far greater authority and power than him:

In verse 16 he says:

"But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." (Luke 3:16):

This seems a strange thing to say, but possibly he is picking up on a Jewish rabbinic saying,

"Every service which a slave performs for his master, shall a disciple do for his teacher, except loosing of his sandal-thong."

In other words, those who followed the Jewish teachers of the day, were to behave as their slaves and serve them in that way. Yet, some things were deemed too demeaning for that - including loosing the sandal thongs.

John is saying that Jesus is far more than another Jewish teacher. John was the most popular and respected Jewish teacher of his day, but he says not that Jesus is so much more worthy than him that he should act as his disciple, but that he is so much lower in status and authority than Jesus, that the thing deemed too unworthy for a disciple to do, he would not be worthy enough to do!

Comparing John the Baptist with Jesus, is like comparing a Primary School football team with the England football team. Jesus is a whole different order of leader to John.

And Jesus will do what no Jewish or any religious teacher could do. He would baptise people with the Holy Spirit. That is he would not just bring wise instruction to show us how to live, he will give us God's power to be transformed within, to change our hearts.

His ability to baptise with the Holy Spirit is a pointer to his Divine status. Jesus is the Son of God, God with us. He is so much more than any other religious leader of preacher.

- Becoming a follower of Jesus, is not like joining a cult. It is about reconnecting with the God who created you and made the whole universe. It is about becoming a child of God, eager to live in the way we were made to live.

A cult leader points people to themselves and seeks to separate people off from the world around them so that they are aligned only to their cult community.

A good Christian teacher or leader will point people beyond themselves to Jesus. They will not be about trying to separate people off from the world, but help them to align more fully with Jesus.

- **Christ's Judgement** (John's future / Our future) - vs. 17

Not that becoming a follower of Jesus does not create a new kind of division between those who are God's people and those who are not. It does create a deeper and more profound spiritual division than anything else.

Yet, this does not mean a separation now. When John spoke about the one coming after him, some of what he said applies to what Jesus does for us now - the sending of the Holy Spirit, whilst some of what he says points towards the end of time, when Christ will return and there will be a final judgement. This is when the division will turn into a separation.

Jesus is described as winnowing. Winnowing is a very familiar task in most pre-industrial rural communities. When you harvest the wheat, the grain is mixed up with the husk. In order to have something you can use for food you need to winnow it. That is you toss it into the air so that the lighter chaff is separated off from the heavier wheat. You then throw away or burn the chaff and store the wheat for grinding into flour at a later date.

Most people would like the world to be free of oppression, injustice, wickedness and evil. The problem is that all these are rooted in the hearts of human beings,

who have not accepted God as God. You need to separate these things off from the world to fix it.

Jesus will do that one day. And it is good news, because all that oppression, injustice, wickedness and evil will be gone and replaced with a perfect relationship with God that enables eternal joyful life.

To enjoy wonderful future, we need to be the wheat not the chaff. We need to be spiritually aligned with Christ, rather than continuing to be Satan's brood.

- Yet, this is a future separation. We are not called to either separate ourselves from the world now or to try and bring about our own winnowing through violence. Rather, we are here to help call more people to repentance, so that they can be the wheat and not the chaff.
- **Fruitful People not Fruitless People** - vs. 8-9, 17
Being wheat not chaff, means being fruitful not fruitless.
John uses a similar image in verse 9, when he talks about trees that bear no fruit being chopped down.

When we are truly spiritually aligned with Jesus, it is not a call to be separate from the world, but it is a call to be distinctive from the world. It is a call as John puts it to produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

The people at the time asked John, what he meant by that. His answers in a way seem deeply mundane and non-radical. Yet, they show us that the change needed shows itself in our everyday lives, not in the radical transformation of societies structures.

In fact, John's focus is a call for us to be a generous people and not a greedy people. In a way this is natural. If we are aligned with a God, who we believe to be gracious, then we too will want to be gracious. If we believe that everything we have has been given by God then we will want to give to others.

So John's answer is deeply practical:

"The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same." (Luke 3:11)

What comes next shows us again that the divisions John cared about were not the racial or political, but the spiritual. He was not calling for a political revolution, but a revolution of the heart.

We are told that even tax-collectors and soldiers came to John to repent. These were people, who although Jewish, were working for the oppressive pagan authorities, for Herod and the Romans.

John does not tell them to stop collecting taxes or being soldiers. He does not incite a rebellion against the authorities or the structures of the day.

What he does tell them to do is to be generous and not greedy. To stop using their position to oppress others and take more money for themselves than they are required to, but to be content with what they have.

Being aligned with Jesus means a radical change of heart. This is the new division John was calling for, not a separation from the world, but a new way of relating to the world.

Becoming a Christian in many ways does not mean making radical changes. Elsewhere in the Bible, Paul makes clear that becoming a Christian does not mean abandoning your marriage or family, even if they remain non-Christians, or changing your job or necessarily making any of those kind of big changes. Yet, it does mean learning to live generously in every area of our lives, with our families and in our workplaces.

I remember when I was a curate, a couple went through a Christianity Explored course that I had run. At the time I did not notice any change or even know they had become Christians. Yet a couple of years later, they spoke at the front of church of how their children had noticed a big change in them. They had stopped arguing so much.

Repentance

Jesus and John the Baptist call on people to repent.

To repent means to change your identity, to realign your life with God.

On a spiritual level it is a deeply radical change:

from being Satan's Brood to God's children,

from being chaff heading for the fire to being wheat stored up for God's eternal kingdom.

from being fruitless to being fruitful.

It does not mean separating yourself off from the world as though, you are joining a cult. But at a basic level in every area of your life, it will mean a change of lifestyle from greed to generosity.

Have you yet taken that step of repentance? And if you have are you seeking God's help to live a life that is full of the fruit of repentance?