

How can we prepare for meeting with God? During the days of Advent this is one of the central question. "Lord, you are coming; what must we do..."

I cannot imagine the Advent season without at least one sermon about John the Baptist. He was a major herald of the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. And John explains to us how our lives can be made right with God. How can you be reconciled with God? What must we do?

## Make straight the paths of the Lord

John the Baptist was in many respects a strange figure. Even though he was from what we would now call a nice middle class background, he decided to dress rather exotically; his daily food was not what you would find in the supermarket; and he preached a radical message that did not make him popular.

It seems not easy for us to understand the person of John the Baptist; and I think one reason for our difficulty with him, is that he was a sort of hinge between the Old Testament and New Testament. Jesus compared him with the prophet Eliyah, and like a true Old Testament prophet, he reminded all people of the laws of God.

Like a serious prophet, he spoke of the coming wrath of God as well. Now that is certainly a message that does not make someone immediately into Mr Popular. If he would preach on our street corner, looking strange, speaking of God's revenge, we would probably avoid him as a mental case. But John was taken seriously by the people of Israel. I guess because the people realised they were living in a time of extraordinary significance.

John spoke of the coming wrath of God. It is tempting to think of the general judgement of God - when all people have to appear before his Judgement Seat. But I think we have to look a bit deeper into the actual history of Israel. I think John was predicting that God would take action against all injustice among the people of God, as actually happened when Jerusalem and its Temple were burned by fire in the year 70.



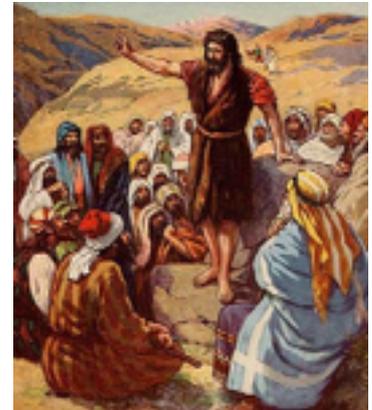
John came to warn the people to escape from God's wrath. He offered a way out. 'Prepare the way for the Lord; make straight paths for Him.' Those words remind me of language used in the most common prayer in Islam, the Fatiha, the Opening Prayer of the Qur'an. 'Ihdina al-siret almustaqiim.' Lead us onto the straight path. Islamic theological scholars agree in general that this straight path is the religion of Islam, and a lifestyle of obedience to Allah and his prophet as prescribed in Islam.

So Muslims who pray that Allah leads them on the straight path mean that he keeps them inside Islam and that they will live strictly by all practices of Islam.

## Confess sins and live the life

What does the straight path mean for John the baptist? Surely, he is speaking of lifestyle. The message of John the Baptist has echoes of the Old Testament prophets who called people back to full obedience to all the laws of God.

John calls people to conversion and to change their life. If we look at this superficially, this connects his message with Islam, and in fact, with any religion that preaches that in order to please God, we just have to follow a set of rules and habits.



The message of the Bible is not that if we obey God, he will make our life nice and easy. That is what Islam, and many religions, suggest. Just be a good person in accordance with your religious precepts, and your life will be fine.

This is certainly not the Christian message. John himself died because of his message. He obeyed God, but his life ended miserably. He was beheaded because he criticised king Herod of Judea for divorcing his wife and taking Herodias, the wife of his brother. You know the story, on Herod's birthday, Herodias's daughter danced before the king and his guests. Her dancing pleased Herod so much that in his drunkenness he promised to give her anything she desired, up to half of his kingdom. When the daughter asked her mother what she should request, she was told to ask for the head of John the Baptist on a platter.



Following all the commands of God does not guarantee an easy life but it does create an eternal connection with our loving God. But who is able to obey God so perfectly? None of us. For John, the straight path meant to recognise our sins and to change our lifestyle - but sin always spoils our optimism about our ability to do this.

Islam, and many modern men, have a very optimistic view of humankind. If only we know what we must do, and if we are really committed to do it, then we can live perfect lives that satisfy God.

But the problem of mankind is so deep, we are not able to obey perfectly. And many times we even do not want to obey. We are so messed up. Our problem is deep, it is sin rooted in our hearts and minds. How deep this problem is, became clear by the message and baptisms of John. Thousands came to him, thousands converted, wanted a new life, were baptised.

And the same people, a few years later, shouted for the crucifixion of Jesus our Lord.

Our amazing decisions, our great actions, our firm ideas, they do not seem to change us much. So to pray to God to lead us on the straight path, and then to get the law book thrown at us, is no solution. It does not change us.

And changing from one religion to another also does not help much. John made very clear that for God it does not matter what tribe we are from. He accused the good, law-abiding Jewish leaders that came to him for baptism, that they were just hypocrites, and that only a radical make-over of their lives would satisfy God.



"You think God is satisfied with you because you follow a set of rules and because you are part of the tribe of Abraham? Forget it. That is not enough for God." Muslims believe that by being Muslims and by living by the sharia, the path, the way, they satisfy Allah. They are mistaken. Just as we as Christians are mistaken if we think that by being baptised and by trying to live a morally upright life, God will be pleased with us.

"God can make children of Abraham from any stone you see here in the desert", John says to those who came to him. To be a child of

Abraham is not that important after all. What counts, is change, what counts, is lifestyle. It is not enough to just say a shehada, a creed, - or to just raise a hand to accept Jesus. Real change is needed if we want to qualify for God.

## Its about Jesus - not about my path. He is the Way.

If we make John the Baptist into a preacher of morality, we are totally wrong. Yes, he reminded people of the absolute need for conversion and a renewed lifestyle - as a true child of the Old Covenant. But he was also the bridge to the New Covenant. He was aware that conversion, baptism and a new lifestyle were urgent - but they were not the final thing. He knew, it is not enough



John points to Jesus. The straight path we have to make, is to prepare for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. John pointed to Jesus, much stronger, much more worthy than John the Baptist himself. The final answer to the human problem of separation from God, is not in conversion and a changed lifestyle. The final answer is in Jesus Christ himself.

John says, that Jesus will baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire. What does this mean?

The baptism with the Holy Spirit means, I believe, that He will not change us superficially but He will change us inside out. And more important, by being baptised with the Holy Spirit, it is God himself who connects with our lives. Jesus connects us with God. Surely, we must change our lifestyle. We must live for the glory of God. But that will never be good enough, never perfect, and it does not in itself make us right with God.

For all that, we need Jesus Christ. The one who through his body and blood created a New Covenant between God and us. Who through his death and resurrection was able to return to the Father and give us His Spirit to be God with us, in us, around us.

The straight path does not bring us to God; it does not save us from our sins. Only Jesus Christ can do this. Life and death are in his hands. He will baptise with the Holy Spirit - that means - he relates us to God.

And he baptises with fire. This is the fire of the chaff that will be burned with unquenchable fire. The choices to be made are radical, John holds before us. Allow Jesus Christ to make your relationship with God right through the Holy Spirit. The only alternative is fire.

Does this mean our conversion and changed lifestyle are not important? Of course they are important. But do not think for a moment that our change sets us right with God. It is Jesus Christ. And real change only comes when Jesus Christ is part of our life; without the Holy Spirit's work, what can change in us? Our will power is hardly enough. Our decisions and commitments, just remember the people baptised by John who a few years later shouted 'crucify him'.



Whereas in most religions, and in our natural, automatic reflex, the straight path seems to be about us and about what we must do for God, in the Christian faith it is about Jesus Christ. It is his path. We allow him to be in our lives by confessing our sins. By admitting we do not have the means in ourselves to live for God and to please God. By acknowledging that on whatever path we walk, we will never reach the height of divine perfection.

Surely we desire to live worthy lives for Him. But the best we can do, is to believe in Jesus Christ, and to allow Him to work in our lives for change through the Holy Spirit that He has given us. But all this acknowledges - all change, all salvation, all blessings, they begin with Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Goodness does not originate from me, but from Him.

A focus on the need for change may seem pious, but it is, in a sense, idolatry. It takes our eyes away from Jesus Christ, from God. It looks more at us and what we must do, than at God, our saviour. And to this God John was pointing all people.

Listen to the prophets, listen to John the Baptist, be a good person. But all that is so minor compared to Jesus Christ. He is stronger and more worthy than anything we could ever do for God. And by being related to him, in our heart and our mind, Jesus Christ releases his Spirit to work in us - to change us, to renew us. In a manner that goes much deeper and farther than what would happen if we focus on change.

That is why John the Baptist shouts it out, when he sees Jesus come: see the Lamb of God who carries away the sins of the World. He is God with us, He forgives our sins, He gives the Spirit of God in our lives for making us better people - what an amazing Gospel. What a reason to focus on Jesus only.

### CONCLUSION

The best way to prepare our hearts and mind for God, is by looking at the only one who was able to walk the straight path perfectly. Focus on Jesus Christ. Have faith in Him. Allow Him to work through his Spirit in your life. And then you will more and more walk with Him on that straight path. But do not focus on how you walk, do not focus on the path. Focus on Jesus Christ himself.

Amen

