

SERMON: 9 December 2018 – Mrs Sarah Finegan

**“REMOVING THE OBSTACLE COURSE”
(Luke 3:1-6)**

I wonder if any of you have toughed it doing a physical obstacle course recently? Maybe you have heard of the well known challenge called Tough Mudder? It’s a giant obstacle course made even worse by the mess and hazardous mud on the way round. Some people love it and have toughed it out through the mud and physical challenge to reach the finish line. One of our own congregation members Raymond Kirk has attempted such craziness.



I’d like you to keep that image in mind as I talk today about John the Baptist. Traditionally we spend the second Sunday of Advent thinking about the role of this weird man who was a forerunner Jesus’ ministry.

When I say weird - I mean weird. What strange details the gospel writer decided to journal about him. His strange clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt and the fact that he lived on locusts and wild honey (sound like

something from “I’m a celebrity get me out of here!”). He seems to be a drifter living out in the Judean wilderness. Maybe today we might call it an “alternative lifestyle”. When the gospel writers include these details they do so for a purpose. They are expecting you as the reader of this account to realise something. And they are not expecting you to just think about him as a weirdo! It goes deeper than that.



Do you remember that before John was even conceived his Dad, a Jewish temple priest had a visitation by an angelic messenger from God who told his child would be great in the eyes of the Lord? The vision was so intense we the readers are told that his Dad was blinded by such news. He was told his child would fulfil the ministry of Elijah himself (one of the most significant Jewish prophets). And this is the reason we are told of his clothing. This is the same clothing as Elijah himself. The writer wants you to know that John was fulfilling what had been foretold about him. If you were reading this account the time it is was written it would shock you that the son of a priest would be wearing such clothing. He should have by his 30th birthday taken up priestly duties in the temple but he has rejected this.

Do you ever like to wonder about the bible stories about the bits that they don't tell you. I keep wondering why John seems to have totally rejected the

Jewish religious customs at the time in favour of being homeless, giving up his valuable status as part of the priestly tribe, becoming effectively a scavenger of food when his family were the religious entitled.

I wonder if the vision his Dad had must have told him about had a profound effect on what he decided to do. I wonder if he too had had significant encounter with God that convinced him to leave the lifestyle that was mapped out for him in favour of being the announcer of Jesus' coming. I wonder if years of watching people kill animal after animal after animal to make peace with God about their sin made traumatised that he couldn't watch it anymore. I wonder if he saw the rich people, who could afford to buy the animals to kill, go back and live just as sinfully afterwards in the knowledge that they could kill again. I wonder if he thought the whole sacrificial system was meaningless and pointless. I wonder if he saw many poor people who were unable to have access to the temple as they could not even afford to buy the animal to make a sacrifice.

All of this added up to make the man John the Baptist that we get to read about. Did God come to him in a dream or did he just know deep down that the God he knew wanted people to **live dramatically differently**. He knew God's forgiveness was not about an exchange (sin for blood) but a CHANGE in how people lived. He physically and verbally abandoned the ugly, bloodthirsty, elitist, obstacle course of the temple system and laws so people could actually change. Inside he was crying out "SOMETHING HAS GOT TO CHANGE" or people never will.

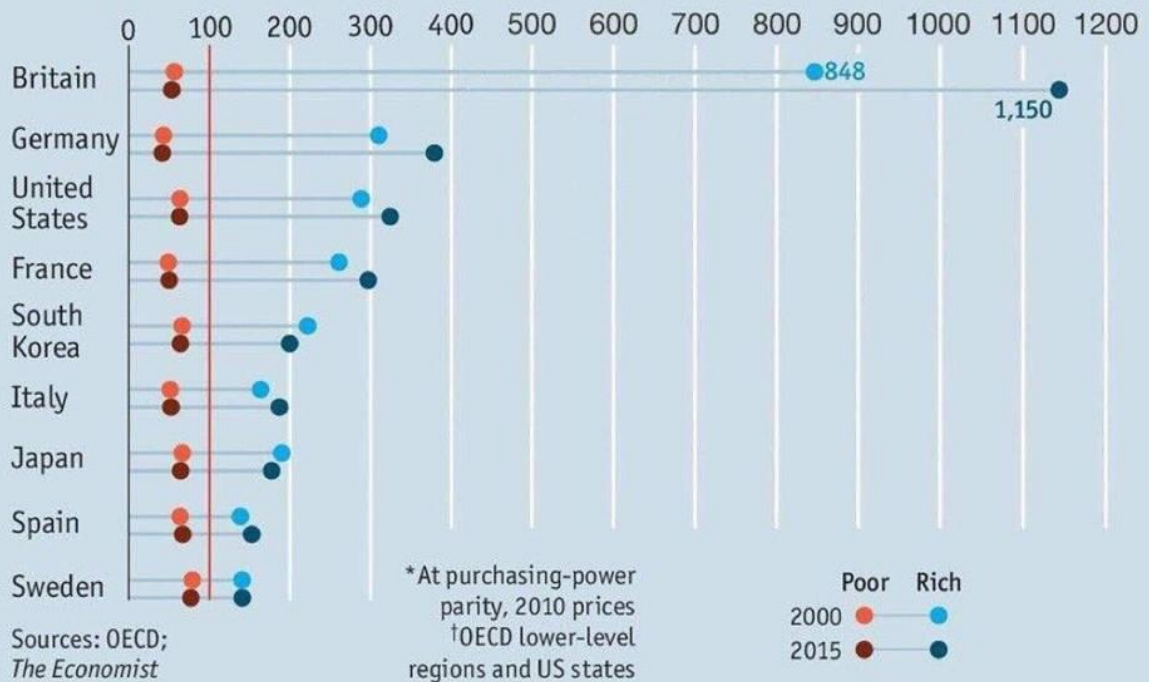
He seems to be using a ritual with water that was no longer about a physical cleansing from impurity BUT was a symbolic act of a inner desire to LIVE DIFFERENTLY. The water was a catalyst or a kick-starter to this! He washed people in the river far from the temple and told them to share their food, their clothing and stop participating in systems that rob the poorest people. HIS MESSAGE WAS COMPLETELY COUNTER TEMPLE CULTURE WHERE THE GAP BETWEEN RICH AND POOR was systemically heightened.

IT WAS NEVER MEANT TO BE THIS WAY.THE WHOLE SYSTEM WAS CORRUPT. THE WHOLE SYSTEM NEEDED TO GO. It doesn't sound too far away from what is happening in our nation currently.

The rich get richer

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GDP per person* of poorest and richest regions†
National average = 100



Economist.com

We all know it's wrong. It suits us. It suits us. But it doesn't suit us - the collective body of our nation. SOMETHING HAS GOT TO CHANGE

John the Baptist was not just a person in favour of economic reform but he was also a religious obstacle course remover. When there is religious reformation it always informs our economics.

- No money – no issue
- No status – no issue
- Not ritually clean – no issue
- Not Jewish – no issue
- Hated by social – no issue
- Unable to enter the temple – no issue Everyone was invited to live differently!

He waited in the wilderness for people who wanted to live differently and they came in their hoards to hear his reforming message (Luke 3: 10-14). It tapped

on desperation within people who were crying out “SOMETHING HAS GOT TO CHANGE”.

He was making a straight path to God a rejecting the religious obstacle course rejecting the Jewish religious system. And who endorsed his intention. God himself. Jesus didn't go in to the temple at the beginning of his ministry and say “Hey, Mr High Priest, is it okay if I just continue on from here” NAH! The HIGH Priest would have never said YES! No way - because to do that would endorse the corruption that was going on. What does he do instead? He goes into the wilderness and finds a homeless man and gets him to baptise him and John says to all his followers – listen to this guy (my job is done). Jesus rejects the religious establishment because Jesus was NOT AN OBSTACLE COURSE CREATOR. Jesus came to tear down every barrier between people and God. He himself was and is the Catalyst and Kick Starter for living the life that deep down you most desire and need.

We as a church need to reform to embody the calling of John the Baptist more and more. To remove every religious obstacle so that people can hear about God and begin living the lives they want to live deep down.

What obstacles are we putting in the way today?

-The religious buildings – intimidating, old fashioned, a huge financial commitment and frequently we give them a priority and reverence more than sharing the message.

-Sunday worship – most unchurched people enter a church and miss Jesus because the old songs, the ceremony and the traditions don't mean anything to them. And that is not their fault. They are probably not going to start coming to something that means nothing to them

-Religious language – jargon leads to doubt, scepticism and internal switching off instead of engaging with people's needs and questions

-Theology of sexuality – people see The Church as a whole and homophobic and unwelcoming to everybody. I would agree. I don't think churches are perceived as safe spaces.

-Believing as certainty – The Church seems to be unwilling to engage Sunday by Sunday with science and questions which leaves our people forced into thinking that Christians are deluded by untruth.

-Our religion is the best – a spiritual arrogance that can be present prevents people from seeing God in all people and makes our message partisan.

-A notion that a proper Christian is one who has realised they are nasty sinners and then prays the magic prayer to be Jesus' friend.... A true friend would live like Jesus.

All these add up so that to an outsider church looks like Tough Mudder and at the finishing line they don't see people living dramatically different lives to their own.



The way to God should be easier, lighter (Jesus' description) and let's add natural – it's in our very nature to connect with our maker. I also happen to believe that people want to live differently it's just they are so part of a system

that it's hard to escape or even know where to start. The system masks the deep inner hunger for a better way of living.

People in general don't like the rat race of materialism and perfectionism but are caught up in it

People don't like the daily grind to make enough money to buy all the stuff that society says makes you happy. People know it doesn't.

People want to give away their money to the poor because it makes them incredibly uncomfortable to see it but they don't trust the system enough to know that if they gave everything they had other people would care for them. There is no shared economy - its every man for themselves.

People want to be less isolated but after they have put in a day's work, made sure their children have completed every task and activity to make them the next child prodigy, bought everything to make sure they are living the life they think they want, they have hardly any energy left to put into friendships, helping in the community and imagining different ways of living. They flop down on front of the telly, eat junk food, do the socially programmed social media thing and fall asleep. And they wake up and the next day is the same. Most of the time this is fine but they get these moments of quiet when they wonder...why do I do all this stuff... why do I want the things I want.. why is every day the same and the world is so messed up???

What would break this Groundhog Day? A new story being told, a new story being lived out that is attractive, inspiring and demonstrated.

Why do I know people think like this – because I am one of them. The very small difference is I have studied the life of Jesus, I have imperfectly tried to live out what he says and I have seen it works, I have been so caught up in his story I can imagine and dream of communities living differently. I imagine that if I lived the Jesus story all on my own I might end up hungry, hated and homeless but if I lived his story in a community living his story IT WOULD BE SOMETHING. Rewriting the economic system would just be the start of it.

Imagine for a moment that you and me go out into the wild spaces of Kirknewton and East Calder and we set up a Jesus community and we begin to love each other and the community unconditionally, creating a group of

kindness with people who are committed to non-violence (even in their thought life and politics), who share their possessions, work for justice, no one is poor, we produce inspiring teachers, courageous activists, there is no force, cohesion or manipulation, everyone is free to go or stay. There is incredible joy, celebration and acceptance.

Some might say from cynicism and/or life experience that this would be impossible but for me this is where things get REAL. If you believe in Jesus it should mean that you want and need to enter your life story and make it fit the life story of Jesus. You are willing to do it because you don't want when you wake up tomorrow for the world to be the same. And even if the task seems impossible you can still dream ways of living. Even if we fail in other people's eyes we have still moulded our life and lived out the self-empty lifestyle of Jesus. No action of love is ever wasted. Look at the cross. What looks like failure is actually victory.

Anything other than embodying Jesus is just like Jesus. We might sing songs about him, hear stories about him, and maintain the buildings but the fruit of this is just liking Jesus and making religious traditions which more than likely one day will become obstacles to those who come after us.

We have the free choice which direction we want to travel on and to work towards. One leads to THE BODY of Christ being visible to our communities and one leads to a museum to the life and work of Jesus.

John the Baptist presents to us a vision for what we should be doing as the body of Christ.

Our faith community must prepare the way for people to hear about Jesus and make it easy. We must -

Go into wild spaces

And make a straight path to God



Bring down every mountain and hill

Fill up every valley

Straighten out every winding road

Smooth over all the rough places

This is our task.

NO MORE TOUGH MUDDER

NO MORE RELIGIOUS OBSTACLE COURSE

We must embody Jesus.