



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

Searching the Scriptures

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Here in the Wesley Theatre, I begin a short series which focuses upon two chapters in John's Gospel. In just five weeks, we shall look at the ministry of Jesus as John records it for us.

One of the helpful aspects of looking at the ministry of Jesus is that it causes us to reflect upon our own daily engagement in mission.

These passages are important for a number of reasons, but most significantly because in any judicial setting it was essential to say that more than one person was able to ratify the evidence brought before a court. Jesus will eventually appear before the courts of both the Jewish religion and the authorities of the day.

We read that Jesus gives a self-testimony but that this is not enough of itself, for it must have a proper confirmation by other witnesses.

Text: John 5:31 -

"If I testify about myself, my testimony is not true."

We shall explore the ways in which we can study the testimony of Jesus as it was offered to the people of his day:-

- The scriptures recognise the power of this witness – 5:31-40
- We shall listen to Jesus making his defence – 5:18-23
- We examine the causes of unbelief in those listening to the evidence – 5:41-47
- We see him feeding the crowd – 6:1-21
- All this speaks of the works of God – 6:24-35

Let us begin by examining these words of Jesus. N T Wright reminds us that frequently in John's Gospel we have the sense that we are spectators in a court of law. We might see ourselves, as it were, in the public gallery.

I still have in my mind that court scene in South Africa which had people night-by-night watching and listening to evidence marshalled in relation to an international athlete. Initially, we were not au fait with the case, but were drawn in each day as we listened to the evidence being gathered.

John regularly talks about evidence which is sometimes translated "testimony" or "witness". As you read these words you could almost have the feeling that Jesus is on trial, though the charge is not really clear. It would be a mistake only to concentrate on the earlier breaking of the Sabbath law and assume everything is related to that incident.

Jesus' authority is what is under question and a powerful list of witnesses is being assembled to give a meaningful defence of his ministry. We will examine together four of the planks of John's presentation in defence of Jesus at this point in the gospel.



If the claims of Jesus were only supported by his own words, they would have been considered unreliable and Jesus was well aware of this, as were those hearing these words of the gospel for the first time.

The concept of witness has both religious and legal connotations. When studying John's Gospel, it could be concluded that a trial motif is running throughout the whole gospel. Of course, this will come to a head in the trial of Jesus Christ himself in John 18 and 19.

It is Jesus who makes it clear that he does not offer a witness in isolation; he uses additional witnesses to confirm both his identity and the purpose of his ministry, which are powerfully presented. Jesus may well be speaking, but he relies upon a wide range of testimony. Jesus links his testimony with that of others.

As his mission continues, we can see how the staggering claims inferred throughout his ministry are supported by his right to make them.

THE TESTIMONY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST – v.32

Inevitably, we are being encouraged to reflect upon the first chapter of the gospel and uniquely the Prologue, where John has a very significant role to play.

We read, "There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light." (1:6-8)

Jesus declares that John is a witness to the truth. Yet he goes on to say, "I have testimony weightier than that of John." (v.36)

Gary Burge reminds us that "John preceded Jesus, identified him, worked with him, and directed his followers to become Jesus' disciples. Although his ministry was enjoyed (or indulged) for a time, in the end, it was rejected."

John's testimony is very much that of a human colleague and there is the special relationship of John with Jesus; closer than any other.

In *The Message of John*, Bruce Milne reminds us that human testimony to Jesus continues to be significant, not least from those who declare the gospel in words and, of course, in deeds.

He refers to one of the great religious portraits on the continent of Europe – by the German artist, Matthias Grunewald. The striking feature of the painting is its focus on the pointing index finger of John, as he directs attention to Christ on the cross.

This painting had a profound effect upon Karl Barth, who, not infrequently, referred to it in his writings. For Barth, and many Christian thinkers since, there can be no greater privilege given to men and women than to point to Jesus Christ.

John the Baptist ensures that we do not unduly glamorise the preacher's role, for John was put to the sword in Herod's dungeon!



If we are serious about declaring the nature of the good news, we must be equally alive to the fact that it will often be rejected. The values that underpin that message are accepted by no more than a minority of people. This challenges any triumphalist or market-driven model of Christianity, as and where it exists.

Giving witness to Jesus Christ is the calling of us all, but John the Baptist had a very distinctive role and he remains such an important part of the witness as to who Jesus Christ is.

Milne tells us that Thomas Carlyle's comment glows with life when understood in this context. He said, "Who, having been called to be a preacher, would stoop to be a king?"

Charles Wesley picks up the same mood:

Happy, if with my latest breath
I might but gasp his name:
Preach Him to all, and cry in death,
'Behold, behold the Lamb!'

John the Baptist was like a lamp that burned and shone a perfect tribute upon Jesus Christ (v.35). If we use this model of the lamp, we remind ourselves that:-

- A lamp is lit and, therefore, bears a light that is not of its own making ... it was shining for a time
- A lamp offers warmth and the burning message of a warmed heart ... it draws people and moves them
- A lamp can be used to point the way ... beyond itself
- A lamp does, however, eventually burn out

For me, the most telling passage of scripture which relates to John the Baptist is found in John 3, and John 3:30 in particular has so much to say: "He must increase and I must decrease." John saw that his function was to fade into the background, so that Jesus Christ can be truly seen for who he is. John was happy and ready to do this.

THE TESTIMONY OF GOD THE FATHER – v.36

God provided the witness of himself in the ministry of Jesus. Of course, there is the audible voice heard by some at his baptism and on the mountainside. But it is far more than this!

For Jesus, the inward presence of God was powerful and it is this that gives him confidence in relation to the mission to which he was clearly being called (17:1-6).

There is something altogether deep, and yet essential to our understanding of the ministry of Jesus, in recognising that Jesus defers all things to the Father. There is a sense in which each aspect of witness flows from our understanding of God the Father.

In the previous section in John's Gospel, we see how healing and life is mediated through Jesus Christ and he makes a clear assertion, "My Father is always at work to this very day, and I too am working." (5:17)



In this passage we have what Ian Barclay described as “the most systematic statement to be found anywhere in this gospel on the relationship between Jesus and the Father, and his understanding of the work the Father had called him to do.”

The Jewish leaders would find it hard to come to terms with or accept such a suggestion – and the authority of Jesus becomes a reason for their persecution of him and what will ultimately lead to his death.

When we are addressed, as each of us is, by the call of Christ to follow and to serve, we recognise that:-

- In him, we hear the voice of God speaking to us
- In him, through the power of God’s Spirit, we find his presence mediated to us
- In him, we see the nature of God in all he does

I recall reading the words of William Barclay on this theme: “When we are confronted with Christ we see in him the altogether lovely and the altogether wise; that conviction is the witness of God in our hearts.”

One of our greatest challenges is to see the work of Jesus Christ at the centre of all we do. In our multicultural context, we must find appropriate and positive ways to name the Name of Jesus Christ.

Basil Hume, the twentieth century Roman Catholic Cardinal of Westminster, in conversation with the BBC’s religious correspondent, said, “If you accept that Jesus is the revelation and manifestation of the Father, then you are a follower of Christ and so a Christian. If you move from that to asking in what sense is Christ God, then I would think you have come in the end to making the act of faith which Thomas made as he declared ‘My Lord and my God!’”

THE EVIDENCE OF HIS DEEDS – v.36

Jesus is conscious that his own works are important. These are not simply powerful miracles, but signs which will eventually culminate in the events of the passion and the resurrection.

These works point not merely to the identity of Jesus, but also to the unity of purpose with God the Father.

I have often referred to the fact that John’s understanding of the miracles is that they are a small selected group described as “signs”. They seem to embrace the whole of Jesus’ ministry and are found at critical points.

The witness of the miracles is weighty. As one writer put it so clearly, “Jesus’ works bear witness to the relationship to the Father and to his vocation as the One whom God has sent, because God gave him the works to do.”

The deeds and signs of the ministry of Jesus are always best understood in relation to God the Father:-



- God sets his seal of approval upon Jesus Christ
- God speaks with clarity in the Person of Jesus Christ
- God, in the Person of Jesus Christ, reveals himself

George Macdonald, the great Scottish Presbyterian preacher and writer, was the inspiration for much of C S Lewis' life – and, when writing on the theme of the deeds of Jesus, he concluded: “The miracles of Jesus were the ordinary works of his Father, wrought small and swift that we might take them in.”

At strategic moments, we see in the extraordinary activity in this world, the extraordinary communication of grace and love.

George Appleton, a former Bishop of Jerusalem, talked about the Kingdom of God as demonstrating just who he was. He wrote, “He claimed that in himself the Kingdom had drawn near, was in operation, and he had called people to accept this fact in faith and to change their attitudes, behaviour and world view.”

THE EVIDENCE OF THE SCRIPTURES – v.39

It would appear that the majority of people listening to these words were Pharisees or other religious leaders and Jesus recognises the serious intention of their religious life.

If we were to take a look at the end of this passage, we would see that the chapter concludes with what can be described as an unexpected line of reasoning. Jesus suggests it will not be him who will accuse the leaders, but Moses, which of course describes the law upon which their whole lives were built. In other words, their own source of reference will prove him right!

By adding the scriptures to his list of witnesses, Jesus was challenging the religious leaders of the day.

When examining this passage, many writers refer to Luke's Gospel and the marvellous Emmaus Road account, where we are told that Jesus fulfilled the scriptures as he walked with the disciples at Emmaus. There we read that he opened “Moses and all the Prophets” (Luke 24:27) to the two disciples who, for the first time, understood the scriptures concerning Jesus.

What the scriptures represent remains important in defining how we understand the ministry of Jesus and the work we have been called to do. It would appear that a dividing line between Jews and Christians is emerging at this point in the gospel, in relation to the interpretation of scripture:-

- Christians claimed that God's revelation in Christ was continuous
- Christians claimed this as the crowning point of God's revelation
- We too, in our day, are going to have to find ways of speaking the word we find in scripture as being a defining word in our apologetic task

Scripture is ultimately the source of our saving life in Christ. The early church would need to maintain the importance of scripture in relation to the whole of their life together as a community.



It is as we ourselves take note of the powerful witness surrounding the ministry of Jesus that we shall discover the nature of his Lordship in our own lives.

Blaise Pascal, the remarkable seventeenth century French scholar, was a mathematician, a physicist, inventor and a profound Christian philosopher.

He wrote, "There are three kinds of people in the world: there are those who have sought God and found him and now serve him, those who are seeking him but have not yet found him, and those who neither seek him nor find him. The first are reasonable and happy, the second reasonable and unhappy, the third unreasonable and unhappy."

I return to George Macdonald who, in his Unspoken Sermons, wrote, "The notion that the salvation of Jesus is a salvation from the consequences of our sins is a false mean, low notion ... Jesus did not die to save us from punishment; he was called Jesus because he should save his people from their sins."