



The Burning Bush - Online article archive

The First Word After A Long Silence

I am sending out this article on this the first day back for Free Presbyterians from a Covid lockdown which started back on 10th January. **See Newsletter report.**

In Kilskeery, we had a very good morning meeting with Mr Samuel Fitton, a second-year Theological student, preaching on the text, Judges 21:25, "In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes."

This article is the result of my wife and I considering and talking yesterday morning about the restart of the services.

I trust that it is a benefit and blessing to you all.

"In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," Matthew 3:1-2.

The last prophet to proclaim God's Word to Israel was Malachi, some four hundred years before the birth of Christ and the ministry of John the Baptist.

I thought on this yesterday as my wife and I discussed this fact as we contemplated the recommencement of the Free Presbyterian Church services after some two months of voluntary lockdown, due to the rise in the spread of the Coronavirus at the end of last year.

As I pondered on this fact, I thought of what it was the Lord said after the prolonged silence, following the end of the witness of Malachi.

That silence was a judgment upon a disobedient and defiant nation. Their defiance may be seen in the record of Malachi's preaching.

"The burden of the word of the LORD to Israel by Malachi. I have loved you, saith the LORD. Yet ye say, Wherein hast thou loved us? Was not Esau Jacob's brother? saith the LORD: yet I loved Jacob, and I hated Esau, and laid his mountains and his heritage waste for the dragons of the wilderness," 1:1-3.

"A son honoureth his father, and a servant his master: if then I be a father, where is mine honour? and if I be a master, where is my fear? saith the LORD of hosts unto you, O priests, that despise my name. And ye say, Wherein have we despised thy name? Ye offer polluted bread upon mine altar; and ye say, Wherein have we polluted thee? In that ye say, The table of the LORD is contemptible," 1:6.-7.

"Who is there even among you that would shut the doors for nought? neither do ye kindle fire on mine altar for nought. I have no pleasure in you, saith the LORD of hosts, neither will I accept an offering at your hand. For from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same my name shall be great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense shall be offered unto my name, and a pure offering: for my name shall be great among the heathen, saith the LORD of hosts. But ye have profaned it, in that ye say, The table of the LORD is polluted; and the fruit thereof, even his meat, is contemptible. Ye said also, Behold, what a weariness is it! and ye have snuffed at it, saith the LORD of hosts; and ye brought that which was torn, and the lame, and the sick; thus ye brought an offering: should I accept this of your hand? saith the LORD. But cursed be the deceiver, which hath in his flock a male, and voweth, and sacrificeth unto the Lord a corrupt thing: for I am a great King, saith the LORD of hosts, and my name is dreadful among the heathen." 1:10.-14.

These verses give us a sample of the arrogant hard-heartedness of the people and their readiness to chal-



The Burning Bush - Online article archive

challenge the words of God.

Little wonder silence followed for four hundred years!

But what is of note is the very first word that the Lord, by His Spirit, puts into the mouth of John, as recorded here in Matthew, "Repent"!

I thought that was most suggestive. Please consider:

I. AFTER A PROLONGED ABSENCE OF THE PREACHING OF GOD'S WORD, REPENTANCE IS NEEDED AMONGST GOD'S PEOPLE.

Few rightly understand the outcome of the preaching of God's Word and the secret workings it has upon hearts, chiefly upon the hearts of God's people. The absence of the preaching of God's Word has a most detrimental impact upon all.

1. John spoke to the people as a people wandering in a wilderness. He quotes and applies the words of Isaiah the prophet. "For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight," Matthew 3:3.

Without the influence of the preaching of the Word of God we wander! It is like sheep without the voice of the shepherd - they wander. "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way," Isaiah 53:6. We all need the touch of the Shepherd's staff and the sound of His voice to keep us in line! ". . . thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me," Psalm 23:4.

2. The preaching of the Word of God is His chief sanctifying agent. Consider these verses.

"Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you," John 15:3.

"They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth," John 17:16-17.

"Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish," Ephesians 5:25-27.

"Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently: being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever," 1 Peter 1:22-23.

Here is ample proof of the sanctifying, purifying effect of the Word of God. Remove from a people from under the public preaching of that Word and there is an accumulation of uncleanness!

3. That was very evident amongst the people to whom John, and later the Lord Jesus, ministered.

Listen to the words of the Saviour. "Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying, This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men," Matthew 15:7-9.

Here is what happens when the sound of God's voice is silent. The foolish, misguided voice of man takes over!

Never was that more evident than in Ulster than today! I never imagined, when I started out to preach some 55 years ago, that the land would be flooded with such folly as it is today!

"Churches", so-called have sprung up on virtually every street corner and men stand up to proclaim themselves 'servants of God' and propound the most foolish, and essentially, blasphemous nonsense to a people



The Burning Bush - Online article archive

gullible enough to heed them!

It is as God's Word said it would be. "Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron," 1 Timothy 4:1-2.

Such indeed is what can be heard any day of the week in our Province where once, not so long ago it would seem to me, the pure Word of God was widely proclaimed.

4. How quaint the faithful servant of God appears amidst such deceivers! "And the same John had his raiment of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey," Matthew 3:4. Quaint and all as John may have appeared to the many, he was of course garbed in the apparel of the prophet. Elijah is described for us in 2 Kings 1:8. "And they answered him, He was an hairy man, and girt with a girdle of leather about his loins. And he said, It is Elijah the Tishbite." John followed in the footsteps of the great prophet. John came in the 'spirit of Elijah'. "But I say unto you, That Elias is come already, and they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed. Likewise shall also the Son of man suffer of them. Then the disciples understood that he spake unto them of John the Baptist," Matthew 17:12.

The appearance of John contrasted greatly with that of the 'accepted' spiritual leaders in that day! Heed the Saviour's words. "Then in the audience of all the people he said unto his disciples, Beware of the scribes, which desire to walk in long robes, and love greetings in the markets, and the highest seats in the synagogues, and the chief rooms at feasts; which devour widows' houses, and for a shew make long prayers: the same shall receive greater damnation," Luke 20:45-47.

Daily we see parades of such 'scribes and Pharisees' presented to us in newspaper reports, containing their deceitful words and damnable doctrines!

II. AS THE WORDS OF JOHN WERE OFFENSIVE TO MANY, SO TODAY THERE ARE MANY READY TO CHALLENGE THE PURE WORD OF GOD!

1. It must be said that John used the plainest and bluntest of terminology. "But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Matthew 3:7. Here is bold preaching indeed! This was said, not in some newspaper column or church newsletter but right to the face of those guilty!

2. It is to be noted that the Lord Jesus approved and copied such preaching! "Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him," Matthew 3:13. Not only did the Saviour approve of John's choice of words but He copied them! "But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in," Matthew 23:12. That whole chapter is worth careful consideration that we might rightly understand just how error and hypocrisy is to be condemned!

3. John dealt with the issues of his day. His was no general enunciating of the cardinal truths of God but rather a plain APPLYING of those truths to the behaviour of the people. Such preaching will be welcome by a people, especially those long fed on generalities and that which has been couched in language designed not to offend. "Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan," Matthew 3:5.

I believe that there is a hunger for just such preaching today! Oh not everyone will welcome it but there is a people who long for just such plain application of God's Word. What good is ointment in a jar! It must be applied to the wound for it to be effectual. That is what is needed to day!

"And the people asked him, saying, What shall we do then? He answereth and saith unto them, He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath meat, let him do likewise. Then came also publicans to be baptized, and said unto him, Master, what shall we do? And he said unto them,



The Burning Bush - Online article archive

Exact no more than that which is appointed you. And the soldiers likewise demanded of him, saying, And what shall we do? And he said unto them, Do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely; and be content with your wages. And as the people were in expectation, and all men mused in their hearts of John, whether he were the Christ, or not; John answered, saying unto them all, I indeed baptize you with water; but one mightier than I cometh, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire: Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and will gather the wheat into his garner; but the chaff he will burn with fire unquenchable," Luke 3:10-17.

Notice, "the people asked him," "Then came also publicans to be baptized, and said unto him," "And the soldiers likewise demanded of him, saying. . . "

People are looking for answers to questions which few are addressing in our pulpits today!

How welcome would be a 'John the Baptist'!

III. MANY WILL BENEFIT GREATLY FROM SUCH PREACHING.

As we have already noted, "Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan," Matthew 3:5. There is a harvest ripe and waiting today, waiting for the sharp scythe of such preaching as that of John.

1. Such good was prophesied of John's preaching. John's father, Zacharias, said this of his son by the power of the Holy Ghost: "And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways; to give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins, through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us, to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace. And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his shewing unto Israel," Luke 3:76-80.

Yes, much good will come of such preaching as it did of that of John's ministry. The "knowledge of salvation" shall be spread abroad and "the remission of their sins, through the tender mercy of our God" enjoyed by many.

What a blessing a voice like of John would prove to be, even in this dark time!

2. John's preaching was highly commended by the Lord. "And as they departed, Jesus began to say unto the multitudes concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind? But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? behold, they that wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet. For this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come.

He that hath ears to hear, let him hear," Matthew 11:7-15.

3. Though he was murdered because of his faithful preaching, his voice is heard still today. How often have thousands of faithful preachers taken up his wonderful words of introduction to the Lord Jesus and applied them over the last two thousand years? "The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world," John 1:29.

O 'behold Him' today and may you yet be the latest convert to Christ through the faithful labours of John



The Burning Bush - Online article archive

the Baptist

May it please the Lord to grant such a voice to be heard in Ulster again.

Rev Ivan Foster (Rtd)

Lord's Day, 7th March 2021.