

LUKE 3:1-6
FINDING OUR PLACE AND OUR PATH

I have a piece of a jigsaw puzzle. Do you like doing jigsaws? I love doing them but I don't get so much time to do them; one of the delights of the holidays after Christmas and over New Year is to do a jigsaw! We will probably do one with 1000 pieces, though I do have one in its box that has 5000 pieces, and I've had it for 30 years not opened, but one day! I have a piece of smaller jigsaw here, one that has about twelve pieces; can you tell what it is? It is a Postman Pat jigsaw and this is the centre piece of Pat and his van. Postman Pat's creator John Cunliffe died this year; how many generations of children have learned these stories and done this jigsaw! As we add each piece, the picture gets clearer and so we know more of what the picture is, with Pat and his van, his cat, and other people. But I've left off some of the edges; the jigsaw is not complete; we can't see the whole picture without all of the pieces, the jigsaw is unfinished and a bit rough round edges.

I want to make the jigsaw a little parable of life for us. Each piece has a place in the big picture – what is our place in the big picture God has for world? I'm making an assumption that maybe not all of us will accept – we have a place in God's big picture; maybe you struggle to accept that you have a place in God's plans for the world! We all have a place! The jigsaw was not finished – in what sense are we not yet the finished article and a bit rough around the edges? We could ask that question about ourselves as individuals; we could ask that question about our church – what is our place in God's mission in the world? In what sense is our church an unfinished piece of God's work? Are we still a bit rough around the edges as church? Which piece of the jigsaw are you? God has a big picture that He is making, a picture much bigger than we will ever understand; each one of us has a place in that picture and there are hinge moments in making that picture, moments that change everything forever. The coming of Jesus is *the* hinge moment in making that picture and today we think about how God prepared for Jesus' coming and prepared the people for their place in that picture.

Luke tells us the story of John the Baptist and the beginning of his ministry. As we said earlier, John is God preparing the way for Jesus. Quoting Isaiah 40, John is a voice: "*A voice...*" (Luke 3:4) I love the way that Luke places John in a time that people will have known. Sandra bravely read these names, 6 of them: Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas and Caiaphas – in one way or another their place in the picture is as rulers, political and spiritual leaders of the people in Israel at the time. We can place John in AD25/26 by these secular and religious leaders, a real time in a real place, a place and time that people who are reading Luke's gospel for first time will know and will have heard of. This is no fairy-tale made up to keep people happy; this is a real story, earthed in a real world. At this time, the Spirit inspires John to begin his ministry.

John is voice: "*A voice...*" (Luke 3:4f) "The Lord will arrive without fail, travel without difficulty and be undelayed by hindrances." (Motyer) He's not travelling by public transport in the UK then! When the king travelled in Isaiah's time, his servants went ahead making the roads easier, flatter, smoother, straight, level, with no obstacles. The place and job of the voice is to prepare the way for the Lord's coming, to prepare the people to meet the King when He comes. John is fully aware of his place in the story: he knows that he is not Messiah; he knows that someone more important is coming behind him; he knows about Jesus! He knows what his place is in God's bigger picture and is wonderfully content to be the best man to Jesus' bridegroom. He doesn't try to make his place more important than he is, but he is content with who he is, content to be a "voice" from God.

"Voice" means a prophet! In our Bible study we've been talking about Amos, the prophet in the Old Testament. One of things Amos promised was a famine in Israel, but not a food famine, rather "*A famine...*" (Amos 8:11) We said that God would go silent and that for a time there would be no prophets from God, nobody speaking the word of the Lord to the Lord's people. Someone has written: "When John appeared, not the oldest man in Palestine could remember

to have spoken even in his earliest childhood with any man or woman who had seen a prophet” (John Seeley, quo Wilcock p.54 note) John is the first new prophet in so many generations, with the famine of God speaking, there had been none, but now at this new time, a new prophet has come! “*The word...*” (Luke 3:2) This is a moment of great magnitude, so important in the big picture of what God is doing!

By far and away the most important ministry of John was his preaching “*he went...*” (Luke 3:3) Repentance – it is not the most popular word in the world. It is a word that tells us we need to change, but because we’ve got things wrong, we’ve made mistakes, our moral compass is out of kilter, we’ve neglected important things and we need to change. We don’t like that! Try telling people that they’ve made a mistake and see how they react! Try telling our world that its values are skewed and see what reaction you get. Try going onto Twitter to suggest that something of the spirit of our age is wrong and see how many people begin to give you abuse. Our pride is hurt; we don’t like it. John is telling people that they have made mistakes; they have sinned; they are out of shape and they don’t like it; “no! we’re Abraham’s children; we can’t have made mistakes; we can’t need to repent!” Some realised; some saw; some were baptised as an outward sign of their inner repentance, turning away from sin and turning back to God.

This was John preparing the way for Jesus. Preparing the way for Jesus meant preparing people to meet Jesus, getting their hearts and minds ready to meet Messiah, the Son of God, the Saviour, so that when they met Jesus they would believe Him. John knew and this is where we need to learn from him – John knew that Jesus was the centre of the picture. Jesus was at the heart of God’s plan and purpose to bless the world; John knew that he was the best man to Jesus’ bridegroom and was content with that. Paul writing to the Philippians knew that Jesus was the centre of everything, their faith, their conduct, their behaviour, their prayers – all to be centred on Jesus and shaped by Him. Do we know that Jesus is the centre, the most important piece in the jigsaw? Is He the centre of our life, our faith, our behaviour, our prayers, our church?

What then is our place in the jigsaw? Remember, we’re not a finished work yet, we’re still ragged at the edges, there is still work to be done. Again, let’s learn from John. John’s place in the jigsaw is to tell people about Jesus. That is our place too, to tell people about Jesus and to point people to Him. It is not church at the centre; it is not us at the centre, but Jesus is at the centre. We are challenged to tell people about Jesus: when someone asks you “what are you doing for Christmas?” will you tell them about Jesus and His place in your Christmas, renewing your faith, coming to Church? Tell people about Him! People don’t know the story of Jesus as much as we think they do! They need to hear and how will they hear unless we tell them; nobody else will! John Lewis will tell people that Christmas is about Elton John and his piano; other stores are available. When people come here over Christmas they will hear about Jesus; maybe you could invite your family, friends, and neighbours. Tell people about Jesus.

We need to show people what Jesus is like. That is harder because it seems as if we’re trying to show ourselves off as paragons of virtue, but done in the right spirit, that’s not it! We try to model Jesus by the way we behave; we try to live according to the ways and values of Jesus. When people look at us as Christians what do they see? Do they see people who are trying to be like Jesus? Who are trying to think like Him, to speak like Him, to behave like Him, people whose lives are shaped by grace, forgiving, accepting, being humble, people who are careful about what we say to and about one another; do they see people whose lives are shaped by justice, wanting a world that is fair for everyone; and people whose lives are shaped by loving the things that Jesus loves? Is that what people see in us?

Our place in the jigsaw, alongside Jesus is to point people to Jesus. Jesus is the centre, the One around whom the whole picture revolves. We all have a place in the picture alongside Jesus, partners with Him in the blessing that God has for us and for the world. John’s place:

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to prepare the way for the King, a voice in the desert; our place is to point people to Jesus, to tell His story, to show His values. There are so many other voices at Christmas; our challenge is to let the world see and hear the greatness of Jesus! What a place we have! What a privilege!