

Series : How Jesus Impacts People
JESUS IMPACT ON JOHN THE BAPTIST
(Luke 3:15-22)

Just before Christmas I got hold of a copy of Peter Clack's book called 'Firestorm' and I have been reading it over the Christmas Period. The author is a journalist with the *Canberra Times* and gives first hand reports of the devastating bushfires that swept across Canberra and the surrounding region in January 2003. Comparisons have been made between the destruction caused on 18th January 2003 and what took place in the bombing of Dresden by the allies in 1945. Both created what is called a 'firestorm' effect where the power of the fire generates its own powerful air currents which has the capacity to lift massive objects off the ground and deposit them meters away. Because the firestorm sucks the oxygen out of the air, many people die from asphyxiation or suffocation not from the destructive effects of the fire itself. 500 homes were lost in the firestorm which struck Canberra four years ago this month and several people lost their lives. It is estimated that over 25,000 people died directly or indirectly as a result of the firestorm created by the bombing of Dresden. Two years ago I read Frederick Taylor's book called 'Dresden' and it is a frightening record of what took place on 13th February, 1945. Historic buildings like the Frauenkirche, Dresden's equivalent of St Paul's Cathedral in London, were destroyed and priceless art treasures lost forever.

Whatever else you can say about these two incidents, one thing is certain. In the space of a few brief days, fire caused a devastating impact. Walking around Dresden after the fires had subsided observers could hardly believe the amount of destruction which had been caused. A woman sent a postcard to her absent daughter. It read simply : "*All three of us still alive. City gone.*" Those who surveyed the scene in Canberra on Sunday morning 19th January in suburbs like Duffy and Chapman were left speechless. Doubtless there will be other incidents like this. Fire, flood, cyclones, and the Tsunami have an impact in a very negative sense but what things can have an impact in a positive sense?

In April 2004 Barbara and I were in the city of Leipzig the sister city to Dresden in the former East Germany. It was in this city in October 1989 that people began to publicly express their deep dissatisfaction over the destructive influence of the Berlin wall. The wall was erected by East German construction workers in 1961 and traversed 155 kilometers across Germany. A series of peaceful demonstrations called 'Monday Prayers' took place in the beautiful St Nicholas Church, Leipzig which so grew in strength that the Stazi or Secret Police were powerless to resist. Finally, on November 9th 1989, the wall came down. Here is an example of how a huge

impact can be created in a positive sense which has transformed modern day Europe and the world. This single event signaled the collapse of Communism in Europe. We could immediately think of other examples where ‘people of courage’ took a stand and made a huge impact on their generation. Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and countless others. But no one has so impacted his contemporaries and those who came after him, more than Jesus of Nazareth. The impact of Jesus and his followers on the Roman Empire was so significant that it was suggested that “*they have turned the world upside down.*” (Acts 17:6)

Over the next few weeks we will be looking at the theme of ‘How Jesus Impacts People.’ We will be tracing Luke’s portrait of Jesus in the 3rd Gospel and asking the question: ‘*If Jesus had that impact then, is there any reason why he should not have that impact now?*’ This morning we will be looking at the figure of John the Baptist. Twice in this Gospel, the impact that Jesus had is compared to fire. Did you notice that! At the beginning of December we looked at the Jesus’ assessment of John but what about John’s assessment of Jesus? Right at the moment when the crowd are mesmerized by John’s powerful ministry, he turns their attention to the person of Jesus. There is no way he wants to ‘hog the show.’ He’s not some celebrity, a ‘prima donna’ who wants to bask in the glory of all this attention. His summary of the situation is – “*I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.*” (Luke 3:16)

If we were to collect together all the statements that John makes about Jesus, it would make a very impressive list. The question we should ask ourselves is - “If Jesus had that sort of impact on John which shaped his whole life and purpose am I prepared for Jesus to make that impact on me?” There are four things which emerge from this passage that illustrate the profound effect that Jesus had on John. I hope we can reflect on these this morning and consider how they might apply to us. What else can we note of John’s assessment of Jesus?

1. It made him recognize his own rightful place. (v.15)

Our passage opens with the reference to the special place that John occupied in the hearts and minds of the common people. They were asking themselves the question – *Could this man actually be the Christ?* Whether this began to be verbalized by the people we can’t be sure but if it had been you or me, consider the temptation that must have been present for John to go along with this. A man who is highly regarded, people have been flocking out to hear his preaching, he has all the hallmarks of another Elijah, and now the people are asking the crucial question, ‘*Could he be the one?*’

Just imagine the temptation to go along with this, if even for a little while. But John makes it clear that he is not the One. He is not the promised Messiah, the Christ, the anointed One. In fact he is at great pains to emphasize that the Messiah will be far superior to him.

The most menial job for a slave to do was to untie someone's sandal before washing their feet. That is why none of the disciples volunteered to do this at the Last Supper and why Jesus did it instead. It was a distasteful, unpleasant job, because people's feet would have been caked with donkey and camel dung from trudging along the dirt roads. And what does John say? *"One more powerful than I will come, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie."* John is saying that he is not fit to do even this distasteful, menial task for Jesus. By comparison with Jesus that's how insignificant he is. I wonder how many of us here this morning have a view of the glory and greatness of Jesus like that, and a the sort of humble self-assessment shone by John? It was J.B. Philip's who years ago wrote that little book with the catchy title, *"Your God is too small because you are too big!"* When our assessment of Jesus is inadequate and we have an inflated view of ourselves, we are in trouble. John goes on to illustrate that the two baptisms that accompany these two figures are as different as chalk and cheese. He might baptize with water, but Jesus the coming one will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. (v.16) The language itself illustrates the dramatic effect Jesus' ministry will have on those who are open to it. The impact on their lives when they truly turned their lives over to Jesus would be like being immersed in a flood or like the overwhelming effects of fire. Water and fire of course in the Bible are symbols of God's purifying power so when a person surrenders their life to Jesus, the Holy Spirit will create something equally dramatic in their lives.

Are we prepared to let Jesus have that sort of impact in our lives. I believe it begins with a willingness to be like John and bring our lives under his lordship. What else did John's assessment of Jesus mean?

2.He reminded his hearers of how all will be exposed by Jesus' .(v.17) He is like a searchlight focusing in on our lives. There can be no fudging with Jesus, not trying to pull the wool over his eyes. We might be able to fool one another but one of the most dramatic aspects of Jesus ministry is that everything is exposed in it's true light. *"His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."*

There's that reference to fire again. The winnowing fork was used to toss wheat and chaff into the air as a primitive form of harvesting. The wheat grains being heavier would fall straight to the ground. The lighter chaff would be blown to one side. This is a picture of the way Jesus will make his

judgment on people based on how they have responded to him. Those who have accepted Jesus into their lives will be gathered up, taken to be with God forever. Those who do not accept Jesus and the salvation he offers will be like chaff which the wind drives away (see Psalm 1) Here is a reference to the seriousness of refusing to submit to Jesus when we have heard of his love and offer of forgiveness. What else can we learn of his impact?

3. John also reassures us with the good news. (v.18)

Verse 18 tells us – “*And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them.*” John was urgent with his hearers, this was not a trivial matter, it was not something that could be delayed. If one far greater than he is coming, then people must take this call seriously. I can see John admonishing the people, pleading with them, telling them to live lives God’s way. He was not afraid to speak out against what was wrong, but he also gave them hope. In short, “he preached the good news to them.” Now John didn’t have the full and final revelation that we have today for Christ was yet to die for the sin of the world. But you can be sure that it was nevertheless true. It would have pointed people to the Messiah, the one anointed with God’s Spirit, the one promised by the O.T. prophets, and the one who would come and save god’s people. And John’s pointed exhortations went right to the top, even to the throne room of King Herod.

4. He resigned himself to doing what Jesus wanted (Matt. 3:14-15)

It is interesting that Luke only dedicates two short verses to the baptism of Jesus, but if you flip over to Matthew’s account you get a fuller account. In chapter 3 we read – “*Jesus came into Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him saying – ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’*” Everything about this situation made John recoil. It went against the grain and the idea that he should baptize Jesus, just wasn’t part of the script. You can sense his reluctance to go along with this. I wonder if there are things in our lives that Jesus want to deal with but we are reluctant. It may not be something as clear cut as this. Maybe he wants you to face up to something in your life that you know is wrong. Or to step into some new challenge which seems a bit scary. Well, Jesus replied – “*Let it be so now,; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.*” What Jesus is saying is that this is part of God’s plan, it is a powerful way of showing that Jesus want to thoroughly identify with the people he came to save. He didn’t need John’s baptism, certainly he didn’t need a washing as a sign of repentance, for he has no sin of which to repent. This was Jesus’ way of saying to those who had been baptized by John, “*I am with you, I am on your side.*”

We have a God who wants to draw alongside us and help us. That is why God assumed human nature and came among us at the first Christmas.

Jesus identified with us supremely by dying in our place on the cross. So here we see Jesus identifying himself with those who want to turn back to God. And it is this Jesus who is declared to be God's beloved Son, in the voice which immediately comes from heaven. And in response to all this we are told, "*John consented.*" John resigned himself to doing what Jesus wanted.

What an impact Jesus must have had on this great prophet. He recognized his rightful place. He reminded his hearers that everything will be brought into the searching light of his judgment. He also reassures his hearers with the good news of God's love and forgiveness through Christ. And, fourthly, he resigns himself to doing what Jesus wants. What a force for good John the Baptist was. How much we need figures like that today. What if we were willing to let Jesus have that sort of impact in our lives to mold us and shape us for his purposes.