

Christianity and You Are Part Of History

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[0 : 00] again to your word. The pages, the print on the pages of this book, which we hold in our hands, we ask that your word may, that we may acknowledge it to be indeed your word, and that we may be given your grace to hear it, and that that word will accomplish in our hearts and lives that which you purpose it should, in guiding and directing us, and enabling us to live the lives which are pleasing and acceptable to you.

We ask this in Christ's name. Amen. It is always a lovely Sunday night because there are still some people around who haven't gone home, having been in Vancouver for Christmas, and it's nice to have them, or have gone back to school or some such place as that.

And then there's people who've come to Vancouver to start the new term or start work here with the 1st of January, and so there's strangers in our midst whom we trust will not be strangers for long. There is a very select company of people in our midst tonight who have been to one of the wonders of the modern world between Christmas and New Year's, which is the Urbana Missionary Convention in Urbana, Illinois.

And since they're used to standing up, would you all stand up to see how many you are? I know three anyway. I guess I know everybody.

[1 : 52] I thought that there might be more of you, but it's an amazing convention, and I just contrived with Mr. Greenman that because this sermon will be relatively short, and therefore the service will be over relatively early, and much of the evening will still remain to us, that if you will rush over to the hall, we will sit down and get some information on something which I'm sure will inform and inspire you considerably just to hear something of the story that these three can tell us of the convention which they have attended.

So that will come immediately after the service. Isn't it funny that after almost 10 years of evening services, pleading with people to come over immediately after the service, no one has ever paid the least attention.

However, that's... I've done it again, so... I'll see how it works out.

We're looking at Luke chapter 3, verses 1 to 20, and I really want to tell you some things about it which I think are just terribly important without perhaps going into much detail about it.

The first chapter is full of wonderful words like Tiberius, Caesar, Pontius, Pilate, Tetrarch of Galilee, Philip, Trachonitis, Lysanias, Abilene, Annas, Caiaphas, Zechariah, and Anna...

[3 : 43] Zechariah and Elizabeth, and all those historical references. And the thing to become... that it needs to remind you of is that Christianity is rooted in history.

And so, incidentally, are you. You're part of history. You're not just a spiritual emanation that drifts in like an evening breeze.

You are, in fact, a part of history. And the particular circumstances of your life, the trials and hardships, the difficulties, the joys and sorrows, are all part of the volume of history.

And it's in the context of history that you live your life. And it's in the context of history that you encounter the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The birth in Bethlehem, the trial and crucifixion in Jerusalem, the ascension of the resurrection and ascension.

[5 : 05] It's all there in history. And so, Christianity is not an attempt to escape from the particularity of history.

It's a proclamation of good news for you within history where you have to live your life.

That covers verses 1 to 3. Now, are you ready for 4 to 6? Look at 4 to 6 has to deal with the fact that Christianity is not only rooted in history, Christianity sees a way beyond history.

Now, the difference between us is that when we look at the books of the prophets, we think, did they guess it right or are they completely fouled up and lost?

The understanding of Scripture is that the prophets said what was going to happen so that the formative reality of history is the word of the prophets.

[6 : 21] God spoke in various times by the prophets. This is who I am. This is what I am doing. This is what I am going to do.

Thus saith the prophets. And so, when they came to try and sort out all the minutiae of history, there are strong, strong pictures given of what history is all about and how it is going to unfold and what are the things to watch for and what are the things that are happening.

And those things are the things which have been declared to us by the prophets. So you get a wonderful sort of coming together of history in that you have here in verse 4 following the words of Isaiah the prophet from the 8th century BC.

You have those words from the 8th century applied to an event in the 1st century and a man, John the Baptist.

You have them in the 1st century recorded by Luke, the evangelist. And you have them in the 20th century read to us to explain to us how history works.

[7 : 51] So, Christianity sees beyond history. In a sense, the word of God and the prophets in a sense shape the direction and purpose and meaning of history.

So you have the whole flow of history and then you have through it the direction of history as declared by the prophets. It's a wonderful passage.

You know, I mean, it's a... The voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be brought low and the crooked shall be made straight and the rough ways shall be made smooth and all flesh shall see the salvation of our God.

There it is. Magnificent, isn't it? Turn back to Isaiah 41. And that's where it comes from.

[9 : 00] And you'll find that there's a rather completer version of that than Luke records. And... Verse 3 of chapter 40 of Isaiah on page 633 in the Pew Bible.

A voice cries in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, every mountain and hill shall be made low.

The uneven ground shall become level and the rough places plain, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

And what happens in history happens because God has said it would happen, and what God says, he does. And so when Luke begins his story, he begins it with this tremendous word of prophecy that rings down through the centuries, even into our ears this night, and tells us of the purpose of God in the life and ministry of John the Baptist.

Now we come to the next paragraph, and that's where John the Baptist's ministry is described. And here it is, Christianity, given the terrible task of cutting through the subterfuge and mental and physical idolatries of man to reveal the reality of truth.

[10 : 54] He said, therefore, to the multitude that came out to be baptized, you brood of vipers. That's what makes people want to become preachers.

to be able to get rid of all their misanthropy by imposing that on the congregation. But this was John.

This was John to the Pharisees who came out to hear him as he was a voice in the wilderness. And he calls them this brood of vipers.

And he says that there must be that they are fleeing from the wrath to come. You know, almost like in a burning building where you see the vermin come out under the floorboards and out between the rafters in any way they can escape.

And John sees his congregation in that way. he comes to an unhappy end and it may be because he was so unpolite to his congregation.

[12 : 04] But nevertheless, that's what he sees. A brood of vipers fleeing from the wrath to come and warning them to bear fruit that befits repentance and not to depend on the fact that their heritage as the children of Abraham marks them as the chosen people of God simply by reason of the blood that runs in their veins and not the faith that exists in their hearts.

don't tell me John the Baptist says that Abraham is your father for I tell you God is able to make children of Abraham out of these stones.

Tremendous statement. Powerful, powerful statement. And as John the Baptist cuts through all the self deception, the brood of vipers, the fruits that befit repentance.

And repentance of course is that word which is at the cornerstone of faith in God. It's right there. It's the stumbling block on which you stumble or on which you build.

repentance is the necessary activity of all of us. Repentance is the turning point in our lives.

[13 : 53] Repentance is the thing to which we must come and that repentance must be marked by fruit, John says. Ah, fruits that befit repentance.

And then that wonderful metaphor that comes at the end of this description of John's ministry.

The axe is laid to the root of the tree. And I don't know if you've ever, you know, I mean, I've cut down lots of trees.

Money more than you might ever suspect, I might say. And, you know, from the first big wedge you take out of the bottom of the tree and as the blows of the axe fall one after another and you look up at that tree standing straight and unperturbed and apparently unperturbable but the ringing of the axe as it hits the root of the tree, the base of the tree, means that in any moment now, that which has stood for hundreds of, well, years anyway, will suddenly start to go.

And once it's over to there, it's finished. It's got to come all the way down. And the axe is laid to the foot of the tree and the inevitable reality is that the judgment of God has come and it's going to go on and it's going to bring the tree down.

[15 : 44] And so with these powerful pictures of repentance, the brood of vipers, the axe laid to the foot of the tree, John describes what the coming of the kingdom is going to do to all the proud artificiality of man's cultures and man's civilizations.

They won't stand. But then in a wonderful kind of way, John the Baptist then goes on to tell us what we're to do about it.

What are these fruits of repentance? What is it that we need to do? And it's wonderfully simple, isn't it?

If you have two coats, share them with somebody who has none. If you have food, do likewise. The tax collector said, well, what are we to do?

He said, collect no more than is appointed to you. The soldiers came and said, and what are we to do? Rob no one by violence or by false accusations and be content with your wages.

[17 : 00] These are enormous demands to make of people. And yet, I believe that one of the things that we learn here, and one of the things we desperately need to learn, is the old Naaman lesson.

if God asked you to do some great thing, all of you would step up to do it. But God may want you to share some simple thing with another person this day or this week.

He may have something very simple indeed for you to do. Perhaps to spend a week content with your wages.

Perhaps not to use your position abusively towards other people. Perhaps to share something you have.

Some simple act, direct act of personal obedience that you need to think about and you need to work through.

[18 : 17] I heard the lovely story, I didn't hear it, I read it in a book yesterday about one of the great preachers in the time of I wonder whose time it was.

I guess it was the time of Charles James James the second. But he was a child of nine years old who went to church one Sunday and told repentance without restitution means there is no forgiveness.

And that's simple, isn't it? Repentance without restitution is meaningless. And he was convicted by a raid he and one of his young friends had made on a pear tree of a neighbor and that he should do what Zacchaeus had done and restore fourfold.

So a little boy possibly of nine years old with great fear and trembling went to the neighbor and offered him a shilling for the pears that he had taken and went and talked it over with the preacher.

That was a turning point in his life because he did something very simple in obedience to God. And I'm sure that for most of us waiting for the big opportunity to come along that a thousand simple things pass us every day which we could do.

[20 : 13] And it's wonderful that John the Baptist goes from the axe being laid to the root of the tree down to telling people how to behave with two coats as tax collectors how they are to respond.

well then you get a picture of what I would what you might find helpful to think as of as John the Baptist Christianity that is they thought well we don't need anybody more than John the Baptist and they went to him and they said to him whether perhaps you are the Christ and John answers them and says no I baptize with water mine is just a religion of water repentance there's one coming a lot of people I think settle for the kind of ethical behavior a sort of higher level of ethical behavior a higher standard of personal honesty a higher sense of truth and morality but there's a great deal more to it

John the Baptist said and it's not this repentance that you do in response to my preaching it's not the baptism that you accept in response to what I've said to you it's another kind of baptism and it's a much more profound experience and he said that what I'm telling you now is John the Baptist says there's one who is mightier than I coming thong of whose sandals I'm not worthy to untie he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire his winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire there's a there's a testing coming a sense when we encounter

Christ that we are to be baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire and there is a judgment that comes and what is real will survive and what is chaff and uselessness will be burned up in fire there's a very fine separation the kind of the word of the word of God which like a two edged sword cuts right through so this baptism will be a baptism by the Holy Spirit and by fire and who you are will be revealed and you will know what is the value and what is not and the judgment will come and that judgment under Christ between the wheat which is gathered into the granary and the chaff which will burn with unquenchable fire because it's utterly useless it counts for nothing and in the whole process of history the question is what does your life count for how can you know apart from the Lord of history whom we confront in the person of

Jesus Christ by whom we are baptized with the spirit and with fire a deep awareness of Christ's intrusion into the very center of our being well that's how John points to the Christianity which was beyond the simple thing which he was preaching the baptism by the Holy Spirit we as a people of God should be indwelt by the spirit of God and should live in obedience to the spirit of God and should come under that refining process if you want that process whereby the wheat is gathered into the granary the chaff is burned it's a wonderful and terrible thing when we recognize the terrible significance the awesome significance of our lives and how we live how we long to get beyond the superficiality to get beyond the the chaff of life to find the thing which is of ultimate and eternal value part from which there is nothing so that's how John introduced the

[26 : 12] Christianity which was way beyond simply the sharing of coats of the sharing of food something infinitely more than that cut right through to the heart of people then you have the last paragraph the last paragraph ends up with John in prison he preached the good news but Herod the tetrarch had been reprovved by him for Herodias his brother's wife we're all very sensitive about moral charges like that and somehow the truth of them which we accept in our own hearts and live with we find very difficult if they are made public we have our own morality the famous the thing that stuck in my mind the famous judge who knew that the law applied but he never knew it applied to him and you get that you get that that awareness that that

John speaks of there when he speaks to Herod about his relationship to his brother's wife Herodias and John is put into prison and subsequently ignominiously executed well I'd like to start where I'm finishing but let me just give you this one picture because I think it's an important picture and for me it's helpful if you compare John the Baptist with St.

Paul John the Baptist didn't go to any school that we know about he lived in a remote country community he grew up in the wilderness he ate locusts and wild honey he never achieved any standard he never passed any exams he never did anything except to be the man fitted and prepared by God to do a very specific kind of a task a John the Baptist kind of person remember how Paul said that he was taught at the feet of Gamaliel he was a Pharisee of the Pharisees he was of the tribe of Benjamin and he was educated and he could speak in the Hebrew language and he could speak in the Greek language and he knew he could claim the rights of Roman citizenship and God used all those qualifications in St.

Paul's life and he didn't seem to require any such qualifications in John the Baptist life and I tell you that because I think that there is this kind of double dimension to life all Paul's learning led him in

strange paths before he met Christ on the road to Damascus he got everything every qualification but it led him in the wrong direction he had a dramatic conversion experience John the greatest man born of woman was a man whose only qualification was he seemed to have been called by God to do a particular job I don't know what to tell you about that except I want you to respect John the

Baptist I want you to see in this in this unique character a man who was in a wonderful way able to serve the purposes of God in his generation and perhaps to say that the sixth the ultimate qualification for all of us must be that in our generation we are to be a man or woman called by God whose name was yours and that's the supreme qualification for the supreme task that God has for you to do within history that little segment of history in which you are called to live your life [31 : 26] Amen shall we kneel and I will jump PSI People they will believe We pray tonight to our Father.

And so we come with freedom and with an intimacy. We come to our Father who art in heaven. And so we come with the knowledge that he is infinite and eternal. And we come with reverence. Our Father who art in heaven.

To our Father, tonight we pray for the church. We pray for the church throughout the world. Perhaps especially tonight we should remember believers meeting in the midst of deprivation. Perhaps meeting in the midst of persecution. We pray tonight for the church of Christ in Canada. [33 : 29] We pray for the Anglican Communion. We ask for a renewal of the gospel amongst us all in the Anglican Church.

We pray tonight for our own parish life. We ask that during this coming year we'll be a community which is willing to hear the word of God as John did.

We pray for our evening congregation. We pray for our evening congregation.

praying that we may become a place of healing and a place of praise. So tonight we pray for the church.

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light. look favorably upon thy whole church. Look favorably upon thy whole church, that wonderful and sacred mystery.

[34 : 42] By the tranquil operation of thy perpetual providence, carry out the work of salvation. That things which were cast down may be raised up.

That all things may return into unity through him by whom all things were made. even thy son Jesus Christ our Lord.

Lord, in your mercy. We want to pray tonight for those we know who are suffering.

Perhaps someone in your place of work is suffering. Perhaps someone you know at school.

Perhaps someone amongst your friends.

Perhaps someone in your family. We remember tonight those who are unemployed. Pray for those who are lonely.

[35 : 56] Pray for those who are in hospital. Some are going through bereavement. Pray for those who are distressed about the future.

Have heavy decisions to make. Pray for those students among us who have. Such heavy workloads ahead of them.

Pray for those who are suffering. Pray for those who are suffering in any way. Almighty God, who art afflicted in the afflictions of thy people.

Regard with thy tender compassion those in anxiety and distress. Bear their sorrows and their cares. Supply all their manifold needs.

And help both them and us to put our whole trust and confidence in you. Lord, in your mercy. Lord, in your mercy.

[37 : 10] I ask you to take your prayer book. And turn to page 23.

Page 23. Page 23. Page 23. Page 23. One who followed John said, When you pray, pray this way. And so we say together, Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

Amen. O Lord, show thy mercy upon us. Amen. We give thanks to God, who provides an order in society, represented in our case by our Queen.

[38 : 39] And so we pray, O Lord, save the Queen. Pray for those who minister the gospel in the world.

And so we pray, And do thy ministers with righteousness. May thy children be joyful. O Lord, save thy people.

Bless our new brethren. Give peace, Lord. Give peace in our time. That they will find us within us. And with David we say these words, O God, may clean our hearts within us. O God, from whom all holy desires, all good counsels, and all just works do proceed, give unto thy servants that peace which the world cannot give, that our hearts may be set to obey thy commandments.

And also that by thee we, being defended from the fear of our enemies, may pass our time in rest and quietness, through the merits of Jesus Christ, our Savior.

[39 : 52] Amen. Hear the call it for aid against all perils. Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord.

And by thy great mercy, defend us from all perils and dangers of this night for the love of thy only Son, our Savior Jesus Christ.

Amen. And to gather up all of our prayers into one, we say the prayer of St. Chrysostom together. Almighty God, who has given us grace at this time with one accord to make our common supplications unto thee, and does promise that when two or three are gathered together in thy name, thou wilt grant their requests.

Fulfill now, O Lord, the desires and petitions of thy servants as may be most expedient for them, granting us in this world knowledge of thy truth and in the world to come, life everlasting.

Amen. And we say the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Ghost be with us all evermore.

[41 : 10] Amen. Please stand.

Please stand. Amen. Unto us of joy is born, King of all creation.

Came he to a world forlorn, The Lord of every nation. The Lord of every nation.

Cradled in a stall was he, With sleeping cows and answers. But the very beasts could see, That he all men surpasses.

That he all men surpasses. Herod then with fear was filled, A prince he set in jury.

[43 : 04] How the little boys he killed At Bethlehem in his fury.

And Bethlehem in his fury. Now may Mary's son, Who came so long ago to love us, Lead us all with hearts of flame, Unto the joys above us.

Unto the joys above us. Omega and Alpha A, Let the organ thunder, While the choir with peels of flea, Doth rent the air asunder.

Doth rent the air asunder. Please kneel.

Now. Father, accept the gifts which we offer you, In the offering we have just taken.

[44 : 42] And send us out now in the power of your spirit, To live and work to your praise and glory. Amen.