**The Ultimate Volunteer – The Prequel:**

**John the Baptist**

When a really good movie is produced and released, the people who have watched and enjoyed it are often looking forward to the sequel, or in some cases the prequel. In many cases the prequel provides the viewers with new information that helps us to make better sense of the story that was presented in the main feature movie.

When we look at the ministry of Jesus Christ as described in the Gospels we have a narrative that equates to the main feature movie. We see Jesus serving in the role of the ultimate volunteer, undergoing a transformation from the glory associated with heaven to one that involved living on earth in a human body. Fully God and fully man, Jesus then served, living life that was free of sin so that he could become the perfect sacrifice that would atone once and for all time for the sins of humankind. This was the main feature, but could there be a prequel?

The prequel to the ministry of Jesus could well be John the Baptist. John’s ministry is described in Matthew, Luke and John. So why can John the Baptist’s ministry be considered to be a prequel to Jesus, the Ultimate Servant?

**A Role Understood**

Firstly John understood his role which commenced with an angelic appearance, a miraculous conception, father made mute (Luke 1:20) until his birth, and both parents being filled with the Holy Spirt and prophesying after his birth. John, in utero, recognised the presence of Jesus in when his mother Elizabeth met Mary (Luke 1:41). John was also different. He was so noticeably different that the Jews sent priests and Levites to ask him “who are you?” (John 1:19, 22).

To serve God is to be different from the secular world and its expectations. This difference involves more that wearing outlandish clothing and having an insect based diet. The religious leaders of the time saw that there was something different about John, thinking he might be Elijah. This difference is something that we can apply to our lives as followers of Christ in what might be considered to be a sequel to His ministry. Paul wrote that we should be a living sacrifice and not be conformed to the world (Romans 12:1-2). Peter wrote that we should live a life where our obedience and good behaviour in Christ will put those who would revile and slander us for our faith to shame (1 Peter 3:15).

**A Role as a Messenger**

This aspect to John the Baptist’s ministry is twofold. John served as a messenger, announcing the imminent commencement of Jesus Christ’s earthly ministry. He also served as a messenger calling the people of Judea and Jerusalem to repentance (Matthew 3:2). Many people responded positively to this call and sought guidance from John (Luke 3:10). John’s response addressed three groups. To the crowd in general he suggested they share in areas where they had excess. To the tax collectors he suggested they stop ripping people off and to the soldiers he suggested they stop extorting money from people and that they be content with their wages. In other words, he instructed them to stop doing stuff that they knew was wrong. This is a message that still applies today.

**A Role as a Preacher**

Luke’s account of John’s ministry says that John the Baptist both exhorted and preached good news to the people (Luke 3:18). He also warned them that Jesus the Messiah was coming to gather the wheat and burn the chaff with unquenchable fire (Matthew 3:12).

**A Role of Integrity and Courage**

John the Baptist called out hypocrisy when he saw it. His message to the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matthew 3:7-10) was an example of this. It is also a warning to those of us who falsely believe that we are saved by virtue of our descent or affiliation with the term Christian. This is sometimes referred to as being a ‘cultural Christian’. We are only saved by our personal response to the saving work of Christ.

John also displayed great courage by calling out Herod for a range of evil behaviour including an inappropriate relationship with his brother’s wife (Luke 3:19-20). Even when imprisoned by Herod, John continued to serve in the role of a witness to Christ and was acknowledged by Herod as a righteous and holy man.

**A Role as a Martyr**

Despite Herod’s understanding of who John the Baptist was, John was eventually executed on Herod’s order. Once Jesus’s ministry had commenced it might have been tempting for John the Baptist to take some time out from ministry. After all, the Messiah had arrived. He didn’t do this. Instead, he stood firm on what was true and what was right. He called the leader of Judea to account. He didn’t shrink back because of concern over being unpopular. Martyn IIes, writing a blog posted by the Australian Christian Lobby entitled - Do We Lack the Courage to Stand, 16th October 2018, writes:

If we stood firm in the strength of our convictions, believing them to be not only right but extremely important, we would not fall onto the back foot so instinctively. We wouldn’t step backwards at every whiff of difficulty. We wouldn’t be so misguidedly keen to look reasonable.

**Can we be like John the Baptist?**

John’s ministry was an excellent prequel to the main feature – Jesus Christ. Are we prepared be courageous in our service of Jesus and accept that the world will not like us much for being different? John R.W. Stott writes that,

Our love grows soft if it is not strengthened by truth, and our truth grows hard if it is not softened by love.

Jesus has already made it clear that His followers will be unpopular; Matthew 10:22, Mark 3:13, Luke 21:17 and John 15:18 all attest to this. This does not however, mean we make ourselves unpopular through being a poor example of love and grace. Our message needs to be uncompromising, but delivered in a way that will allow the recipients to see Christ in us, ask who we are, and recognise the saving truth of Jesus Christ. Perhaps our relationship with those who currently oppose Christ will become the prequel to the main feature – their new life in Christ.

Pastor Tony Boyle