

ARE YOU A TRUE HERALD FOR CHRIST?

Today's Text: Isaiah 40: 1-11; Matt. 3: 1-17

Extracts:

- 1. The voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill shall be brought low; the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough places smooth; the glory of the Lord shall be revealed; and all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken” [Is. 40: 3-5]**
- 2. In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make His paths straight’” [Matt. 3: 1-3]**

Every January since January 8, 1790, the President of the United States of America addresses a joint session of the US Congress (i.e., the Senate and the House of Representatives meeting together in one place). It is called the State of the Union Address, which is mandated under Article II, Sec. 3 of the US Constitution. It is an opportunity for the President to outline his legislative agenda and national priorities, to reflect on the past while presenting his hopes for the future, not only to the legislators but also to the American people and the world.¹ Consequently, it is now a major television event. Legislators, top government officials and their guests and families always look forward to the occasion. Of interest to me is the man who enjoys the privilege of announcing the arrival of the President. He talks to nobody but focuses his attention on the door that the President will come through. As soon as he gets his cue, he walks briskly towards the august gathering and shouts, “The President of the United States!” Everybody stands up and you hear the music, “Hail to the Chief!” Thereafter, you do not see the man again. He fades out, so to speak. The herald for the President has done his work.

Believers pride themselves in saying that they are heralds (or messengers of the Good News) for Christ. Do they really know what that means? How do we know the true heralds? What lessons can we learn from John the Baptist as a successful herald for Christ that will help us to achieve the same purpose today? These and more are the issues that we shall examine in today's lesson.

¹ “From Time to Time: History of the State of the Union,” www.whitehouse.gov/stateoftheunion/2005/history.html

1. A microphone has no voice!

Earl Butz was the US Secretary of Agriculture under the Richard Nixon/Gerald Ford administrations. In 1975, he led the American delegation to a meeting of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in Rome, Italy. It coincided with the time that the Roman Catholic Pontiff had just issued a controversial *encyclical* on birth control. The document enjoined Catholics not to use artificial contraceptives. Before the official meeting began, Earl Butz was discussing the matter with other delegates but he did not know that the microphone next to him was on and that their discussion was being picked up all over the conference room! A funny man that he was, he said of the Pope, “he ain’t do it, he ain’t make the rules!” In simple English, he was saying that since the Pope is not supposed to make love, he should not be the one to make the rules on lovemaking! His remarks received wide press coverage and American Catholics asked for his resignation.

If you look at the matter carefully, you will see that he ran into trouble because the microphone “spoke” his voice aloud. Nobody blamed the microphone for doing that because it was recognized that the microphone, no matter how loud-mouthed it may look does not have a voice! It says what the speaker says. When the speaker is quiet, the microphone is quiet. When s(he) speaks, the microphone speaks.

In today’s lesson, a herald is defined as “the *voice* of one crying in the wilderness” [Is. 40: 3]. Since the one crying in the wilderness is the microphone, then, the voice being referred to is the voice of the one who sent the herald to cry in the wilderness. A few examples from the Scriptures will make this clearer:

- In describing the return of Jesus Christ, Paul wrote, “The Lord Himself will descend from heaven *with a shout, with the voice of an archangel*” [1 Thes. 4: 16]. You see that it is the Lord that shouts but the voice that carries His shout is that of an archangel. The angel is nothing but a herald, a mere microphone.
- When Moses was called, it was “the angel of the Lord (that) appeared to him in a flame of fire from the midst of the bush.” However, as Moses drew near, what did we hear him being told by that angel, “I am the God of your father- the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” [Ex. 3: 1-6]. Here again, the voice was that of the speaker, God Himself, being relayed to Moses by an angel who was the microphone.

The forgoing then suggests that a herald (whether an apostle or prophet or evangelist or pastor or teacher) [Eph. 4: 11] should only say what s(he) is told to say. You cannot add to it and you must not subtract from it. John underlines this point with respect to the book of Revelation in the following words [Rev. 22: 18-19]:

For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book

How then do we operate as heralds for Christ without running into the traps that can lead us to curses rather than blessings? The answer is simple: *stick to the message and draw attention to its sender*. In practice, we know that that is not easy. Examine the following real life examples:

a) *A herald for religion!*

With the exception of the Jehovah's Witnesses, all the Christian denominations that I know of use the same Bible, irrespective of the versions. So, why then do we have so many denominations and the number keeps growing? If the message is the kingdom and the sender is Christ, why do we have such divergences? The answer lies in *religion*, which is what differentiates one denomination from another. That one group goes to church on Saturday and another on Sunday is not central to the message of Christ. That one uses rituals, such as candles and incense, while the other forbids them is not central to the message of Christ. That one encourages speaking in tongues while another encourages prophecy is not central to the message of Christ. That one group baptizes by immersion while another by sprinkling has nothing to do with the message of Christ. In the end, you find that we spend a greater proportion of our time converting believers from one denomination to another, rather than winning converts for Christ from among unbelievers.

b) *A herald for self!*

There are people who have the true message and acknowledge Christ as the source of that message. However, they want to be the only microphone that must relay it! Some church leaders want to monopolise spiritual power and will frown at any young members of the congregation exhibiting spiritual gifts that could overshadow the leader's own. The line of succession must remain within the family of the founder of the congregation, even when there is no divine calling or guidance for such action. Some half-baked but ambitious assistants cannot wait to get out of their tutelage and set up their own churches. The net effect is a series of splinter groups, each of them heralding the leader rather than God and His Christ.

Paul decried this tendency in the Corinthian church when he wrote [**1 Cor. 1: 10-13**]:

Now I plead with you brethren by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, ... for it has been declared to me concerning you, ... that there are contentions among you, ... that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or, "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

Perhaps a study of John the Baptist will open our eyes to the qualities of a true herald for Christ.

2. John the Baptist as the herald for Christ

The mission of John the Baptist is well laid out in Isaiah's prophecy as follows [Is. 40: 3- 5]:

- ❑ He will be a voice crying in the wilderness [v. 3]. In other words, he will say or do only what God asks him. Wilderness here suggests that he will not be user-friendly. Even if he is alone and what he says is unpopular, he must not relent.
- ❑ His message is clearly cut out, namely, to prepare the way for the coming Christ [v. 3] and to point to His kingdom and His glory [vv. 4-5]

John was the son of a barren woman and aged parents [Lk 1: 7]. When angel Gabriel came to announce John's conception to his priestly father, Zacharias, the angel said, "He will be great in the sight of the Lord, and *shall drink neither wine nor strong drink*. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb" [vv. 11-15].

Is there any link between spirituality and alcoholic drinks? Some people argue that there is none because Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding in Cana [Jn 2: 1-10], and Paul once advised Timothy to take a little wine instead of water for his stomach and other ailments [1 Tim. 5: 23]. Some others argue that there is because God specifically warned Aaron (after the death of two of his sons), "do not drink wine or intoxicating drink, you, nor your sons with you, when you go into the tabernacle of meeting, lest you die. *It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations, that you may distinguish between holy and unholy, and between unclean and clean*" [Lev. 10: 1-10].

My position is that "the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking but *righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit*" [Rom. 14: 17]. When the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples on Pentecost Sunday and they spoke with other tongues, some of the onlookers mocked them as drunk with wine but Peter replied, "these are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day" (9.00 a.m.) [Acts 2: 13-14]. A herald must be filled with the Holy Spirit at

all times, meaning that s(he) will always walk by faith and not by sight, behaving like a drunken person *most of the time!* In that case, s(he) is advised not to touch any alcoholic drink so as not to confuse those who are listening to him/her. That is the import of the angel's message concerning John the Baptist. If your drinking will confuse listeners or compromise the message of Christ, give it up!

How did John perform as the herald of Christ? Let us examine it under the following headings:

a) *His message*

We are told, "*the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness and he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins*" [Lk 3: 2-3]. Matthew's Gospel put it more bluntly as follows, "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!*" [Matt. 3: 2]. Some church leaders (the Pharisees and priests) tried to dilute his message by asking who he was. Was he Elijah? No! Was he the "Prophet"? No! Was he the Christ? No! Who was he then so that they would have a response for those who had sent them? John replied, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness: make straight the way of the Lord, as the prophet Isaiah said" [Jn 1: 19-23]. John was just the microphone. He was blunt. He was unapologetic, just like the microphone! He only passed on to the people what God had spoken. John was a true herald!

b) *He drew attention to Christ*

John did not for one moment draw attention to himself but always to Jesus Christ. When the Pharisees asked him why he was baptizing people when he was not the Christ to come, he replied, "I baptize you with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know. It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose." Even when he was the one that baptized Jesus, he still told his listeners, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. This is He of whom I said, 'after me comes a Man who is preferred before me, for He was before Me'" [Jn 1: 25-30]. As the ministry of Jesus blossomed while John's own was being eclipsed, some brought word to him to stir up his envy of Jesus, but John replied, "He must increase, but I must decrease" [Jn 3: 26-30]. The microphone keeps silent when it is no longer required and it cannot complain! That is another way to say what John said. He was a true herald.

See the impact of John's ministry. In spite of the fact that he did not perform a single miracle, he won more harlots and tax collectors to the way of righteousness than others before him [Matt. 21: 32]. It is no wonder that Jesus recognized

John's work very highly when he said of him, "Among those born of women, there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist" [Matt. 11: 11].

3. Conclusion: Lessons for the modern herald

From the forgoing, we see that you can be the voice that you choose to be. You can be *some voice* in which case your message is determined by how popular it is among those that you want to impress. As God has warned through Isaiah, "this is a rebellious people, lying children, children who will not hear the law of the Lord; who say to the seers, 'Do not see,' And to the prophets, 'Do not prophesy to us right things, speak to us smooth things, prophesy deceits. Get out of the way, turn aside from the path, cause the Holy One of Israel to cease from before us'" [Is. 30: 9-11]. When you cannot mention God in public places or preach against sin, what message will you pass on? It has to be your message. In that case, the herald's voice is his/her voice, not that of God!

However, like John the Baptist, you can still choose to represent the voice of God among a wayward generation. Do not allow people to flatter you into thinking too highly of yourself or your successes. Peter has shown us a good example. Peter was once invited to the home of Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Regiment of the Roman army. As soon as he saw Peter coming close to his house, the army officer ran forward and fell down at Peter's feet and *worshipped* him. "But Peter lifted him up, saying, 'Stand up; I myself am also a man'" [Acts 10: 23-26]. Peter thus remained true to his calling. You try to get an appointment with some church leaders today. You had better pray and fast first! Can you greet your bishops without some show of obeisance? The blame is not all one way. Some followers will not allow leaders to practise humility!

It is a rare privilege to be a true herald for Christ. Keep asking and answering these simple questions:

- *Is the message that I am propagating the Lord's?*
- *Am I drawing attention to Him at all times?*

If your answers to those questions are positive, you are a true herald. Otherwise, you are on your own!