

## **ADVENT 2. Matthew 3:1-12. Repent!**

Today is the second Sunday of Advent. Once again, though Christmas is only a few short weeks away, we spend time reflecting on the double significance of this season.

In this season of joy, we look backwards and remember the coming of Christ as a baby – God’s love breaking in upon earth, never to leave us. However, Advent also looks forward to anticipate Christ’s coming again on the last day, when he will judge mankind in awesome power and victory.

Our Matthew reading this morning focuses on the message of John the Baptist. John came as one who prepared the way for the King to come. His message was directed at the people of his day – but it is equally applicable to us in our own time as we await the return of Jesus.

What was it about John the Baptist that drew the crowds? Certainly not his charm and good looks! He was a real wierdo – even by Jewish standards. And his message was one of hellfire and brimstone! “You brood of vipers” he yelled at the Pharisees. “What are you doing here? Looking for insurance against the coming judgement are you? Well I’ve got news for you! It takes more than just getting WET to escape God’s judgement! Your lives have to SHOW that your repentance is genuine!

Like so many of the Old Testament prophets, John demanded justice and honesty. He called for a life of integrity, where daily living showed a heart that was surrendered to God. He told his hearers that they had to produce “fruit in keeping with repentance.” Not just lip service. Their lives had to evidence a radical change if they were serious about getting right with God.

A tough message. So why did it draw the crowds?

It was because John preached a message of HOPE. Even though he spoke of judgement and fire, he pointed the way to a Kingdom that the Jews had been waiting for, for centuries.

The Kingdom that was promised in our Isaiah reading. A Kingdom where evil is finally vanquished. Where the poor and the needy no longer suffer. Where there is no more wickedness or injustice. Where there is peace and prosperity. And most exciting of all, where we will know God fully and intimately, and share in his rest and glory.

John’s preaching was empowered by the Holy Spirit. He inspired them! He convinced them! After CENTURIES of waiting for the Messiah, the people finally dared to believe John that the Messiah’s coming was finally here – and they wanted to be in on it!

“You want to be part of this Kingdom,” thundered John. Then REPENT! Change your ways! Get your act together. Start living the life you know God wants you to live. Make some changes! And then come and be baptised!

Reminds me of a little church on a hill that was badly in need of a paint job. It was also badly in need of funds, so they went for the cheapest quote. The painter was able to undercut his competition by thinning his paint with tups! It looked good when it went on, but didn't last. He was almost finished, when a mighty storm rolled over. The sky went black and the air was filled with thunder and lightning. Then there was a huge flash of lightning, followed by a clap of thunder so loud that the ground shook and it knocked the painter from his ladder. As he lay on the ground watching the lightning arc above him, he cried out, "God, what do you want from me?" God answered above the thunder, "REPAINT! REPAINT and THIN NO MORE!"

Heheh - felt the need to lighten the mood a bit.... But back to John.

The people came to him in droves. They confessed their sins. That means they verbally admitted that they'd done wrong things. That they'd fallen short of God's perfect standard. That they'd lied, or cheated, or ignored the poor and needy. That they'd skipped going to the synagogue – that they'd been chintzy in their giving. That they hadn't loved God with every fibre of their being. That they'd been slack in serving him. That they hadn't acted in love towards someone....It all came pouring out.

John demanded that they had to determine to change – and then he baptised them.

It was a hard call, submitting to such a baptism. Yet that was what John required of them, if they were to be ready for the coming of the King. They had to totally change their ways. They had to abandon their self-centred living and completely surrender to God.

We are all to a greater or lesser degree, the "tax collectors and sinners" John was addressing. If we want to be prepared for the coming of the Messiah when he returns, we too need to undergo the same radical change that John demanded of his hearers. We too, need to make sure that we are fully surrendered to God. That we are serving him with every fibre of our being – that we are acting in love towards everyone. That our lives evidence that we are Christians.

How can we ensure then, that we are fully surrendered to God? That we have been cleansed and forgiven?

First, we need to spend some time in quiet and prayerful reflection. If we are willing to take the time to come before God in a quiet place, and ask him to reveal to us where we are falling short of his standard, believe me – he will answer that prayer. One of the primary tasks of the Holy Spirit is to convict us of sin. If we ask him to place his finger of sinful areas of our lives, he will certainly do it. But let me tell you, if we are serious about surrendering to God, this can be an uncomfortable exercise. Remember the rich young ruler? He asked Jesus what was lacking in his life – and Jesus honed in on the one thing that meant more to him than God – his riches. And the young man couldn't give them up. God was relegated to second place in his life. And he went away

‘sorrowful.’ We may find that God shines his light on areas in our lives that are just as difficult to surrender to him

Secondly, we need to confess to God as sin, those things the Holy Spirit has revealed to us. Depending on the depth of your Anglican understanding, you may or may not be surprised to know that the Anglican church makes provision for us to actually confess our sins to a priest, and to also receive absolution. That’s not to say that this is necessary for forgiveness – it’s simply recognised as a helpful thing to do. There is a saying that is as old as the Anglican denomination itself, in relation to confession before a priest: and that is, “All may, some should, none must.”

The letter of James exhorts his readers to “confess your sins to one another, so that you may be healed.” There is something very tangible and sobering about giving a name to, and owning up to your sin to another human being. It makes it more real, somehow.

That was certainly my experience the first time I made a ‘confession’ before a priest. Growing up in the Sydney diocese, I wasn’t taught anything about the value of confession to another person. Confession directly to God was certainly emphasised – and rightly – but it wasn’t till I moved into this diocese that I discovered that it was very much part of our Anglican tradition. The first time I engaged in a prayer of confession in the presence of another priest, I found it quite difficult. But it was also really, really helpful!

Part of the Anglican rite of confession is that there is a time where the priest can give godly counsel, in response to what has been confessed. For me, that was an experience of great comfort. It was if God had reached down and embraced me, wrapping me in his love, through the wise and loving words of the priest. Then as the priest pronounced the words of forgiveness – again, it brought home the reality of the forgiveness God gave.

Now I’m not suggesting you all rush out and confess your sins to the nearest priest – but I do hope that you tuck that away for future reference, and perhaps explore it as a spiritual exercise at some point.

The third thing that is necessary if we are to be fully surrendered to God is that we need to ACT upon what we have confessed as sin. Repentance is more than just saying we are sorry and asking for forgiveness. Repentance means a complete change of direction. It means determining, in God’s power, not to do again what we have just confessed as sin. We need to change our ways.

Now of course, gaining victory over sin is often a process – we may find that we fall again and again. But we have God’s promise that if we come to him again in repentance – he will forgive us again. Not an excuse to keep doing it, mind you – but a definitely a comfort when we find that our humanity gets in the way of our intentions.

The message John preached to his hearers as they prepared for the coming of the Messiah, is the same message he preaches to us, as we await Christ’s return. Let’s not

be like the scribes and Pharisees – a “brood of vipers’ who only paid lip service to repentance.

Instead, let’s pray with the psalmist, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

As we repent of our sins, may we know the tender forgiveness of our God, and the joy that comes from living in the centre of his will.

Let’s pray.