

## Sermon 8 December 2019 Advent 2

### Matthew 3:1-12

Let's begin by having a quick look at the person of John the Baptist, an interesting character, to say the least. He was a cousin of Jesus. He lived in the wilderness and preached forgiveness through baptism rather than making temple sacrifices, which didn't exactly endear him to the religious authorities. He baptised people in the River Jordan, urging them to turn away from sin, and at the same time he prepared people for the coming of Jesus, telling them Jesus would be baptising with the Holy Spirit. In other words, God would be working through him.

Matthew makes the connection of John's appearance with a prophecy by Isaiah. *'Listen! I hear the voice of someone shouting, "Make a straight, smooth road through the desert for our God."*' Isaiah 40:3. Roads were notoriously bad in those days but some roads were kept in reasonable shape for the use of the king. When he was about to make a journey, word was sent out to make sure the road he was about to travel on was in the best possible shape. In other words, prepare it for the use of the king. So Isaiah uses this analogy as he predicts someone will come and prepare the people for the coming of a very special king, the Messiah.

I want to focus on John's message of repentance and forgiveness, and let's begin with repentance. This passage begins with a command from John to *'Turn away from your sins and turn to God,'* (Verse 2). It is a message, a command that Jesus himself emphasised on several occasions. *'Turn from your sins and believe in God.'* Mark 1:15. Then there is that lovely verse from 1 John 1:9, *'But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong.'*

There is nothing complicated about repentance. It is simply acknowledging that we make mistakes, that we are human and we stuff up, to put it colloquially! To put repentance into an historical context, the Jews believed that repentance was central to all religious faith, and this belief went right back to the beginning of time.

Firstly, John the Baptist and then Jesus came along and they also made the point that acknowledging of our wayward ways lies at the heart of our faith. The point is this, this repentance or acknowledgment leads to forgiveness, in fact, you cannot realistically expect forgiveness without repentance. It's a bit like expecting rewards without putting in the hard yards. And forgiveness is the reward. Let me come back to that in a second.

Before we reflect on the benefit of forgiveness, let's for a moment reflect on what happens if we fail to acknowledge our wayward ways. There is a lovely verse in Proverbs, *'Trouble chases sinners, while blessings chase the righteous.'* Proverbs 13:21. There is no question that if we insist on leading a life that is not in sync with God, we end up in trouble. I know I can relate to that!

John the Baptist makes this point when he says, *'Every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire.'* (Verse 10). Jesus repeats this message, using the same analogy, when he says, *'Anyone who parts from me is thrown away like a useless branch and withers.'* John 15:6. When we turn away from Jesus, not only do we become unproductive, we also suffer.

So the message here is that repentance leads to forgiveness, which in turn leads to new beginnings. Once again, here we are in Advent and the message has a distinct Easter flavour. This just goes to show that this very important message lies at the heart of our faith, no matter what season we are in. This message of repentance, forgiveness, blessings or new beginnings is so central to our faith that it is entirely relevant no matter where we are in either our journey or our celebrations.

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