

Sermon 4 December 2022

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 through making temple sacrifices, which didn't exactly endear him to the religious authorities. He baptised people in the Jordan River, 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. *'This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight.'"* 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. The passage begins with a command from John the Baptist to *'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'* 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 our faults and 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. To repent is to be righteous. There is no question that if we insist on leading a life that is not in sync with God, we end up in trouble.

John the Baptist makes this point when he says in verse 10, *'Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.'* Jesus repeats this message and uses the same analogy in John 15:6, *'Anyone who parts from me is thrown away like a useless branch and withers.'* When we turn away from Christ, not only do we become unproductive, we also suffer.

Getting back to the point that repentance leads to forgiveness and reward, I want to relate a true story. In 1911 Captain Robert Scott and four other British explorers set out on foot for the South Pole. They

travelled 800 miles through deep snow and bitter cold. A year later they reached the South Pole. But on their return journey, their glorious victory turned tragic. They all perished.

When the bodies of the men were found, the last words that each had written were still readable. One of the men was Bill Wilson, the doctor of the expedition. Bill had attended Cambridge University where he was not popular. He had a mean personality.

However, on the polar expedition Bill became known as 'Bill the peacemaker.' Just before he died, Captain Scott wrote, 'If this letter reaches you, I want everyone to know how splendid Bill has been... everlastingly cheerful and ready to sacrifice himself for the others.' Meanwhile, in his last hours, Bill Wilson wrote, 'I know that I am in God's hands. We must do what we can and leave the rest to him. My trust is in God.'

As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ, we are encouraged to focus on and embrace the way of Christ, which in turn means living in harmony with one another. I quote from our first reading, '*May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus.*' Sometimes that might necessitate a degree of change, as it certainly did with Bill Wilson.

Interestingly, the Greek word for repentance, *metanoia*, literally means 'to change your mind.' So Advent is a time when we have a good look at ourselves and perhaps there is room for some change. As I said last week, repentance strengthens our bond our relationship with God and with Christ, and we need to have that relationship cemented in place so that we can celebrate the true meaning of Christmas fully and appropriately.

So to sum up, 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 liturgical 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 our journey or our celebrations.

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