

Sermon 8 December 2024 John the Baptist

Philippians 1:3-11 Luke 3:1-6

I want to begin by having a quick look at the person of John Baptist, who was referred to in our Gospel reading. He was 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.

I want to focus for a moment on John's message of repentance. I quote from our Gospel reading: *'John went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.'* John 3:3. In Matthew 3:2, John is quoted as saying, *'Turn away from your sins and turn to God.'* 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 well-known 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 all 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. So, how does this relate to this season of Advent?

You might possibly remember that last week I talked about preparing, preparing for this spiritually significant festival of Christmas, and as part of that preparation, we could/should look back over this year that is drawing to a close and review where we might have fallen a little short. Now, coming up short in our prayer life, our reading or our giving is not necessarily a terrible sin, but we have just defined repentance as acknowledging that we have made mistakes, that we haven't got it completely right. So, our preparation does involve reflection and then putting the wrongs to right.

Some of you might remember Jack Nicklaus, who in the 1960s, 70s and 80s ruled supreme on the golf course. It would be toss-up between him and Tiger Woods as to who was the greatest golfer. Anyway, he was playing in the US Open and millions were watching him live on TV. At a critical point in the play, the camera focussed on Nicklaus. He was in the rough and was preparing to play his shot out of the rough.

Slowly and deliberately, he addressed the ball. Then for a full 20 seconds he stood poised and ready to swing. Suddenly, at the last moment, he backed away from the ball, and said loud enough for everyone to hear, *'That's the wrong swing.'* The sports announcer covering the match was confused and said, *'But he didn't swing. What's going on here?'*

A lot was going on, and later Nicklaus explained what it was. He described how he prepares for every shot he takes. It's a process called mental rehearsal. This simply means that he plays every shot in his imagination before he plays it for real. He begins by visualising the ball where he wants it to finish. He then visualises the ball going there. Then he comes back to the moment when he actually hits the ball, beginning with his swing, the swing that will turn the previous images into reality.

What Jack Nicklaus was doing that hot Sunday afternoon in the US Open is what the Church asks us to do during the season of Advent. The Church asks us to go through a kind of mental rehearsal to prepare for the celebration of the coming of Christ, the arrival of God into our world in human form. We are invited to have a good look at ourselves and to ask ourselves, *'How do we stand before God right now?'* Maybe, just maybe, we'll have to do what Jack Nicklaus had to do. We'll have to stop, back away from the ball and say,

'That's the wrong swing.' Maybe we'll have to make some changes, probably nothing monumental, just a tweak, but a change nevertheless. Perhaps we have become a tad complacent and we need to be jolted out of that complacency.

There's a very old story about a wealthy king who lived in a beautiful palace. In spite of his wealth, the king had a simple heart and a deep, sincere desire to find God. He read books, consulted wise men, prayed in the gold-covered palace chapel but to no avail.

One night, while lying in his soft, satin bed, the king was pondering why he was having so much trouble finding God. Suddenly, he heard a terrible racket on the roof of the palace. He went to the balcony and shouted, 'Who's up there? What's going on?' A voice, which he recognised to be the hermit who lived in the forest nearby, shouted back, 'I'm looking for my goat. She's lost and I'm trying to find her.'

Angered by such a ridiculous response, the king shouted back, 'How can you be so stupid as to think you'll find your goat on the roof of my palace?' The hermit shouted back, 'And you, Your Highness! How can you be so stupid as to think you'll find God while dressed in silk pyjamas and lying on a bed of solid gold?' The story concludes by saying that those simple words of the old hermit jarred the king so severely that he rose from his bed and, eventually, became a great saint.

This is just what John the Baptist was attempting to do with the people of his time – 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!' he said. He was trying to jar them out of their beds of apathy and complacency. As I said last week, to repent involves looking back and reflecting on where we have gone wrong and looking forward as to how we can do better. The Greek word for *repent* is *metanoia* which basically means 'to change.' So, we need to reflect and to then change for the better.

In Luke 3:8, John says, '*Prove by the way you live that you have repented.*' We need to ensure we are in the right frame of mind if we are going to observe and celebrate the spiritual significance of Christmas appropriately. That's not easy at this time of the year with a myriad of distractions potentially getting in the way. In the end, if we do manage to do this, it will be reflected in the way we interact with each other, with those on the fringe of society, and with God.

Paul puts it quite plainly in our first reading when he writes, '*And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless.*' Philippians 1:9. Quite a tall order!

Mother Teresa said, '*At this Christmas when Christ comes, will he find a warm heart? Mark the season of Advent by loving and serving others with God's own love and concern.*'

And remember what this festive season is all about – acknowledging and celebrating that the very Son of God is about to enter human history and be born as a baby, not dressed in silk pyjamas and lying on a bed of gold, but lying on straw in a humble stable. There's a very significant message in that, but that's for another time.