

Advent 2 Matthew 3:1-12 John the Baptist prepares the way. 7/12/2025

Lord Jesus, may we hear, listen and respond to your voice this day. Amen.

You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee the coming wrath? We do not know when the Lord will return and come to judge the living and dead. Are you ready? Do you think that being a good Anglican and coming to Church and going through the motions will save you? Repent and believe the good news and produce good fruit in keeping with the commands of Jesus.

That opening may sound similar to those of you who were here last year as I preached on John the Baptist preparing the way from Luke's gospel. It is good for us to hear passages and messages repeated...I don't know about you, but I forget important things sometimes. And so every advent we look at similar passages, reminding us to prepare for Christ's return just as much as celebrating his first coming at Christmas.

John went ahead, preparing the way for Jesus' powerful ministry to come. He called people to return to faith, to repent and to live transformed lives. He did not coat his message with niceties...he said it as he saw it, as compelled by God. He was a Prophet!

However, John's style did not seem to turn the crowds away, rather they seemed hungry for his words. They went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. There had not been a prophet like him for over 400 years, not since the likes of Malachi. John was 'a voice of one calling in the wilderness'. He was God's voice; just like the prophets of old.

The prophets often spoke words of warning and repentance, calling the people to turn back to God and away from idol worship. Some like Ezekiel could only speak the words God put in their mouth. I tell you I would not want to be such a prophet! But it was because the Israelites had turned away from honouring God and were behaving appallingly. God longed for them to return to him. He was their Father and they needed disciplining. They preferred to listen to the false prophets, while locking up or trying to kill God's prophets.

Now it seems the time was ripe and many of the Jews were ready to listen, they were looking for a Saviour from the rotten Roman empire...was John the one? Or was he Elijah, who they expected to return before the Messiah appeared.

John's words may have been uncomfortable for some to hear but he spoke with Holy Spirit conviction and truth. The Lord was drawing his people to himself, and John was the chosen one to prepare the way for the coming King – Lord Jesus.

He was an interesting character dressed in camel's hair, eating locusts and wild honey. We would probably think he was a nutter today, but the Holy Spirit had been upon him from his conception in his mother Elizabeth's womb. Elizabeth, the cousin of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, was older and barren when she conceived. God opened her womb, John was God's chosen one to prepare the way for Jesus.

He wasn't the Messiah and he wasn't Elijah, but he was one like Elijah that Isaiah had prophesied would come to prepare the way for the Lord. The quote in Matthew *a voice of one calling in the wilderness...* comes from Isaiah 40.

The crowds somehow knew that something was happening, their hearts were stirred. They could hear the truth in John's words.

They followed him – even out into the desert. They were perhaps tired of the hypocrisy they saw in other Jewish Religious Leaders; they were looking for something more. Matthew notes that John's especially harsh words, calling them a *brood of vipers*, were particularly directed to the Pharisees and Sadducees, but in Luke's account we read that these words are to the general crowd.

This crowd did not laugh at John and his dress and way of living, they did not run back home because his words were too harsh. They didn't argue with him, when John stated that being ancestors of Abraham was not enough to save them... Like being born into a Christian family, coming to Church every Sunday will not in itself save us...

What did the crowd do? In Luke's account, after he told them they would be cut down if they were not producing fruit; they ask him a question...

What then should we do?

They had come to be baptized, to be cleansed, to be forgiven. John had proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He now tells them that repentance involves a changed life, it involves living a life that shows you have repented. Bearing fruits of repentance.

John's reply to their question in Luke is simple, it was the same message that Jesus would continue to bring as he began his ministry. *Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.*

He didn't say go to the synagogue or temple and take a sacrifice, or fast every week, no, it was care for the poor, share what you have, look out for the needy. Show compassion just as your Father in Heaven is compassionate. Or as Jesus would later say; *Love your neighbour as yourself, love one another as I have loved you.*

John baptized his followers with water for repentance. The Greek word for repentance is *Metanoia*, it can also be translated as transformation. John was preparing the people to be ready for when Jesus came. He was calling them to turn around and live a different life, a new life.

Some in the crowd thought that John was the Messiah, so he tells them that while he baptizes in water for repentance, there was one coming after him who would baptize with the Holy Spirit.

It would have been easy for John to lead a revolution in his own name, he had the numbers following him. But he knew his place. He was not the Messiah. The one coming after him was far more powerful and John in humility says that he was not even worthy of carrying his sandals.

John knew that his baptism was far inferior to the one that Jesus would bring – a baptism of the Holy Spirit and *fire*. The Holy Spirit is what Jesus promised to send his followers after his death and resurrection, and we can wonder if John's reference to fire is the imagery of the tongues of fire that were evidenced on the day of Pentecost. Or was he speaking of a refining fire or of a fire of wrath and judgment.

All could be applicable; in Acts we read that tongues of fire accompany the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost; in the Old Testament, Zechariah, Isaiah, Malachi and others speak of being purified and refined in fire and 1 Peter speaks of our afflictions and our faith being tested in the fire, being refined to the glory and praise of God.

But for those who do not repent and believe, fire represents the wrath and judgement of God. John says that the one who is coming will have his *winnowing fork in his hand, to clear his threshing floor. Gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.*

Luke's gospel then says...*And with many other exhortations John proclaimed the good news!*

You may think John's message was more about judgement than good news, but as he said, the powerful one *did* come to bring his Kingdom – Jesus later reports to John when he's in prison that the blind see, the lame walk, the dead are raised. And Jesus brought salvation as he defeated sin and the devil through his death and resurrection. He *did* pour out his Holy Spirit and continues to do so upon those who repent and are baptized in his name. That is very good news.

But as we remember especially in this season of Advent, one day Jesus will return, he is coming to judge the living and the dead.

And this is good news too. He will come to judge with righteousness and bring justice to our world that is broken with wars and hatred and greed and abuse of power and slavery and poverty and I could go on....

One day as we heard last week from Isaiah 2, there will be no more warring nations, and this week in Isaiah 11, we read of the wolf living with the lamb, the leopard lying down with the goat, the lion eating straw... a beautiful picture of harmony in the world to come, when *the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.*

As we began Advent last week, I explained that these 4 weeks aren't just a countdown to Christmas day when we celebrate Jesus' birth, but also a looking forward and getting ready for his return. In today's gospel we are reminded of the need to heed John's message, that was echoed even more so by Jesus who calls us to repentance and new life in him.

And as we repent, we need to ask, *what then should we do?*

What does our transformed life look like? What fruit are we bearing? Take a moment to think about how you can bear fruit in your situation as a retired person, a mother, father, grandparent, volunteer, worker... Is it visiting a lonely neighbour, being generous with your finances, standing up for truth and justice, living more ethically, being friendly to the outsider, sharing the good news of Jesus, preparing the way for Jesus' second coming.

I know I keep saying it, but a transformed life means loving God and loving one another as Jesus loves us.

We may not like the voice of the prophet, but will we listen to the voice of truth and live accordingly? Will we bear good fruit and allow Jesus to refine us with fire so that we are ready when he returns?

We think of lent being a time to particularly look at our lives and need to repent, but advent is also that season of reflection. In fact, every day we should look at our lives and repent. We might look at how we live and think we are doing great, but the closer we walk with Jesus, the more he will refine us to be like him. I want you to pause for a minute and think about what you need to say sorry for and turnaround from. I know I have things. It may be pride, selfishness, consumerism, spending too much time on social media, or a judgmental attitude or ill feeling towards someone or some people, you may have difficulty being generous with your money, you may be finding it hard to forgive someone, or you may not be walking closely with God, spending time in the bible and prayer.

John the Baptist probably lived a very righteous life out in the desert but even he said he was unworthy to carry Jesus sandals... We have a prayer in the Australian prayer book that

we sometimes say...that *we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under his table*...but he is gracious and merciful and forgiving.

We will now take a moment of quiet reflection and ask Jesus to show us where we need to repent and ask him to help us walk more closely with him, taking on his attitude, and bearing fruit for his glory. We will then say our prayer of confession;

The Lord comes, bringing to light things now hidden in darkness, and disclosing the purposes of the heart.

Confession:

Let us open our hearts and prepare for his coming, confessing our sins in penitence and faith.

**Merciful God,
our maker and our judge,
we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed,
and in what we have failed to do:
we have not loved you with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbours as ourselves;
we repent, and are sorry for all our sins.
Father, forgive us.
Strengthen us to love and obey you
in newness of life;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

The Absolution:

Almighty God,
Who has promised forgiveness to all who turn to him in faith:
Pardon and set you free from all your sins,
Strengthen you in all goodness
And keep you in eternal life,
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**