

Today is the third Sunday in Advent. We look towards the coming of the Messiah. Just as John did. And today we hear the message John gave to the people about who he was and who would follow him.

Last week we were introduced to John the Baptist – with a lengthy description of the life and times...

In the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar
when Pilate was governor of Syria
and Herod ruler of Galilee
together with a few other men of importance
Herod's brother Philip
Lysanias ruler of Abilene
the high priests Annas and his son-in-law Caiaphas.
In other words, the power brokers of the time.

Bruce Prewer wrote an interesting take on this introduction to John by imagining its modern-day equivalent. Who would be named to set the scene for John's ministry if he were to appear today...

In the seventieth year of the reign of Queen Elizabeth II,
when Scott Morrison was prime minister of Australia
and Dan Andrews premier of Victoria
and Rev Denise Liersch was moderator of the synod of Victoria and Tasmania
and Rev Swee Ann Koh minister of Manningham Uniting Church

So, in the 2021, are we ready to hear the message?
And how did John begin his ministry?

Most of us have grown up accustomed to the preacher beginning his/her sermon with a sort of liturgical formula.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, to which an "Amen" from the congregation is, if not expected, at least accepted.

Others begin with: *May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD*, which is an invitation into the shared experience of reflecting on God's word.

Others still may open with: *The peace of the Lord be with you*, which invites the response 'And also with you.'

So let me try, John the Baptist style -

You brood of vipers!
Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?
Bear fruits worthy of repentance.

What do you think? Does it get your attention?

First, let's begin with a little background...

Luke describes the birth and infancy of John and Jesus in matching parallels, from annunciation to growing up. There is no mistaking that Jesus is the greater. John asserts this time and again. But the parallel structure gives the clear message that the two belong together and that what John says is important.

As Bill Loader says, it is not that John's teachings, let alone the Law and the Prophets, are to be left behind.

In Luke 16:16 Jesus declares,

The Law and the Prophets were in effect until John came; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is proclaimed, and everyone tries to enter it by force.

But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one stroke of a letter in the Law to be dropped.

In other words, for Luke, these are new additions which stand in continuity with the past: the Law, the Prophets, John and, as the climax: Jesus.

All remain valid. John's teaching remains valid.

John is a simple man and for him there is no religious privilege, not even in claiming to be one of the descendants of Abraham (or in other words, Jewish). Everyone faces the challenge of submission to God's grace which is symbolised by immersion in the River Jordan. Repentance, says John, is not just being remorseful. It means changing - from one way of being towards another, better way of being.

John fears the crowd is coming seeking to escape the day of judgement through being baptised. For John, baptism is the outward sign of repentance. He repeatedly says,

I baptise you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming...he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

John is teaching that it is the fruit of repentance that counts – the evidence of a changed life.

Remember what he said at the beginning

Bear fruits worthy of repentance...

Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees.

Every tree that does not bear fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire...

This nexus of tree and fruit will also play a part in Jesus' ministry. And in fact, Matthew has Jesus repeat John's warning word-for-word in the Sermon on the Mount.

...a good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire...

Matthew 7:18

John provides a linking point between the Old Testament (the Law) and the New, a place from which we may begin to follow Jesus. He quotes from the Old Testament prophesy

...prepare the way of the lord...

and insists on baptism as a sign of repentance, a way to prepare for what (or rather who) is to come

It is clear John was a formidable figure through the life and times of Jesus, and that his influence persisted well after Jesus' death. All the gospel writers mention him. He is not incidental to their narratives, but the beginning point.

The gospel writers all put their own spin on the story of John in order to get across their own sense of Jesus' significance. But none of them were able to leave John out. His message was clearly important to the ongoing narrative.

John was a charismatic figure. Even today, many people seem to live a faith that is more in the heritage of John than Jesus. They keep the rules, but their faith is based in rule keeping and what is right and wrong.

The people ask John,
What then should we do?

John's reply is,
whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none
whoever has food must do likewise

Note that Luke then specifically mentions two groups of people whom we may not want to see gain the fruits of repentance – tax collectors and soldiers. Even these hated people were not rejected.

To the tax collectors who came to be baptised, he said
Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you
When the soldiers also asked him what they should do, he said
do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.

In other words,
share what you have plenty of
don't take what is not yours
be content with what you have been given

This is not a new message. Recall in the Old Testament,
What does the Lord require of you?
Do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God. Micah 6:6-8

John preached there can be no following Jesus without basic repentance. We baptise with water even today, as a symbol of beginning to follow the way of Jesus (or to use John's word – repentance).

Luke also describes to us a John who knew the limitations of his call to repentance.
One is coming after me...

John contrasts the baptism of water with the baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire by this One coming after.

For Jesus takes us beyond John. There is another baptism, the baptism with another spirit. A baptism of fire!

It changes the way we see the world. We cannot continue to be the same. The act of repentance and the acceptance of Christ irrefutably demands changes of us.

Today we live in a far different world to the one John inhabited. Nothing is simple. Everything now is on a global scale. We see and hear the news 24/7 from all around the world. What happens in other countries affects us here in Australia. There always seems

to be a war happening in somewhere. Sometimes we are drawn in, sometimes not. The Spanish flu pandemic of 1918 and the Covid pandemic of 2020 infected the whole world and it still rules our lives. Climate change will not be mitigated unless every country plays its part. Space travel and medical discoveries have implications for all people, no matter where they live.

It is important on a personal level that we try to live a life considerate of others. But Jesus takes us much further than merely doing right. Jesus tells us doing good deeds to just to appear a 'good' person does not work.
...the one who seeks to save their life will lose it Luke 9

At times, John himself wonders, 'Are you the one to come, or should we look for another'. Jesus' replies in the language of the Scriptures.

...Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them...

John's message was simple.

- be honest - *collect no more than the amount prescribed for you*
- be kind - *whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise)*
- work hard - *do not extort money from anyone by threats of false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages*

In a world where the challenges are huge, it is easy to wonder if the seemingly small things we can do make any difference at all.

David Lose says,

What would it look like if we went out from church looking for opportunities to be honest, kind and hardworking?

What if we determined to seek out such opportunities because we've heard that extraordinary acts of grace are within the reach of ordinary people?

What if we believed – and acted on the belief that being honest, kind and hardworking in a culture that is impatient, immature, and fearful really makes a difference?

For all his fiery rhetoric, John was wrong about one thing. He clearly expected the end of all things would happen very soon.

...the axe is already at the root of the trees...his winnowing fork is in his hand..

These end of the world as we know it has not happened yet. But...

Right now the consequences of climate change and the Covid pandemic are terrifying. The foreboding we feel today is an echo of the foreboding of other times – the people of London in 1939; Hawaii when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour in 1942; citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki when the US dropped the atomic bomb in 1946; just a few months ago the desperate people of Afghanistan trying to flee the Taliban.

John called the people to repentance, to live better lives. His rhetoric was fire and brimstone! But he also brought a redeeming message. John's good news was not that the world was to end, but that the Messiah would come.

It is good to remember that the story of John the Baptist is also Luke's story.

Bill Loader sums it up this way.

As a historian and theologian, Luke has worked to reconstruct an application of the future vision of the kingdom to his present reality, setting an example for us to follow.

The vision of social justice (peace and salvation) which is at the heart of the cry for freedom and the prayer 'Your kingdom come!' is also the agenda for the here and now in every aspect of life.

John has much to say to our contemporary world, not least about how to live it – be honest, kind and hardworking. But that is not all. He also points us to 'the One who is coming'. We await the coming of the Messiah

Let me close by sharing with you, a poem by Rev Jenny Gordon for this Sunday, the third Sunday in advent.

burn

it's not enough that I come
because my family has always been
connected
and it feels right

it's not enough that I come
because it's wise to subscribe to a
higher ideal
than the dross on offer elsewhere

it's not enough that I come
to mouth the words
of prayers and songs
and float along
on the gasp of goodwill
and grand plans

it will never be enough
until I shed my skin of self interest
and propensity for power
and turn around

so burn refiner's fire, burn
consume the chaff blown free
by your holy breath
that wrapped itself around my heart
to falsely shield and shelter me

then stripped bare,
let me come and stand
in the ground of your grace
drink your blessing, put down roots
and in your season, bear the fruits.