

BEAR FRUIT WORTHY OF REPENTANCE

Isaiah 11. 1- 10
Romans 15. 4-13
Matthew 3. -12

I speak to you in the name † of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

As we approach the Christmas season and look forward to God coming to us in human form, our Advent thoughts turn to what we must do to prepare for this wonderful event. Personally, I think that one of the first things that *I* must do is to prepare myself with an honest appraisal of my shortcomings: the sins that I have committed, both great and small. As our gospel reading told us last week, we never know when the hour is coming; and we must be prepared to meet our Lord wherever and whenever we may meet him. And as we have just heard, John the Baptist wants us to prepare the way. He is very specific about how to do that. His words are clear: ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’

Many of us have a tendency to react negatively to the message of John the Baptist. If we are honest with ourselves, it is a message that we do not like to hear. To some of us, John seems dangerous and wild. He’s out of control. He doesn’t live by the rules of polite society, and as a preacher, we’d rather not have to deal with him. John the Baptist does not fit into the box of safe, predictable and comfortable religion. He wants to remind us that we are sinners and that repentance is the medicine that we should take in big doses. John is shaking things up; and he insists that God is up to God-sized things.

We meet John the Baptist at the beginning of each of the gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. In each of them, he is an advance man for Jesus. He comes into the territory and gets people ready for what Christ is going to preach. He’s the warm-

up act; he's wild and hairy and badly-dressed. He wanders out in the wilderness eating bugs and honey. But he comes to deliver a simple message. He is saying that God is about to do something big; and John does not want us to be facing the wrong way when that happens.

You see, that is what all the talk about repentance in the gospel text is about this week. It's about which direction we are facing. It's about where we are going.

Christianity is all about being on the move. We at St Stephen's are a people on the move. We are being challenged as never before to do something new, and to move in new directions. When you read the Bible, it is amazing how many times God gives people instructions to get up and get moving.

Abraham was having a big time in Ur when God came to him and told him to pack up his family and move out. Moses was hiding out in Midian when that burning bush sent him into Egypt to confront Pharaoh. We have our own version of the burning bush; it is in our gathering together in the name of the Holy Spirit to see where God leads us as a parish, and also as individuals.

One of my favourite Old Testament characters, Elijah, was hiding in a cave because an evil queen had sent the whole army to find him and kill him. God turned up, heard Elijah complain about the miserable working conditions you encounter when you are called to be a prophet of God, and then told Elijah to leave the cave and to go back to work.

Christ began his ministry by inviting two fishermen to follow him. At the resurrection, he appeared to two other men walking to Emmaus and travelled with them.

On the road to Damascus, he appeared in blinding light before Saul and sent him off as perhaps the most important travelling preacher in the history of the Church. We now know him as Paul.

Our faith is a moving faith, a travelling faith, an on-the-road faith. In the early days, it was simply known as ‘The Way’.

And so when John the Baptist shows up shouting at us to repent, he is telling us to head in a new direction, to choose a new Way.

In both the Old and New Testaments, the word for ‘repent’ means to change direction; literally, to go back the way you came; to return to something you left. The message of this and every Advent season is to prepare for the coming of the Lord; and to prepare for Advent means repentance. In calling us all to repentance, John the Baptist is reiterating the most basic message of Christianity – return to God. Repentance is a two-step process: we *turn from* our sin, and we *turn to* God. We feel the need to turn to God, because, as God said in the book of the prophet Ezekiel, ‘But if the wicked turn away from all their sins that they have committed and keep all my statutes and do what is lawful and right, they shall surely live; they shall not die. None of the transgressions that they have committed shall be remembered against them; for the righteousness that they have done, they shall live (18. 21-22).

It is easy to ignore messages like the one we have from John the Baptist; it is easy to discount them as the ravings of a mad man in the wilderness. As Josh Billings, a contemporary of Mark Twain, wrote, ‘It is much easier to repent of sins that we have committed than to repent of those we intend to commit.’ And it is even easier to assume that the real target of John the Baptist’s message is someone *else*. We do not have to try too hard to look around and see someone whom we think is more out of step with God’s kingdom than we are. If we put our minds to it, we can think of a

few people who could use a little holy fire. It is easy and tempting to say that John the Baptist came preaching for those people. Yet John the Baptist came to all people in our gospel reading today. He told them to repent, confess and be baptised. They were all manner of sinners, like you and me. And then the so-called ‘good people’ showed up. The gospel tells us that the Pharisees and Sadducees came out to see what all the commotion was all about; and they found John the Baptist. He took one look at these people, and let them have it. This is not what they were expecting. They were the religious elite of Jerusalem. They were the church people who did what God said. They never skipped worship. They prayed beautiful prayers; they were from families that had been important Jews all the way back to Abraham. John the Baptist took one look at them, and knew that all their outward religion could not hide the parts of their lives where they pushed God out, or ignored what they knew God desired.

Now like us, the Sadducees’s and Pharisees’s sins were not big and dramatic. But here’s the trick: when you are moving, when you are going along a way – even ‘The Way’ – when you are constantly in motion, just a few small steps can take you far off track. Before we know it, it is possible to lose sight of God’s way entirely.

John the Baptist came to meet the world in these places, the wild and barren places, telling us, ‘Repent’; go back; get on the road with God again.

Today, we are each offered the opportunity to repent, the chance to turn back from those thoughts, habits and actions that take us out of step with God. We are invited to move back again in harmony with God’s vision for us and for our world. During Advent, during this season of great expectation, let us seek to find again the one who called us to follow him; the one who still walks beside us along the road to God.

Amen.