

## Sermon – Advent 2 2008

Readings: Isaiah 40: 1-11; Psalm 85; 2 Peter 3: 8-15a;

Mark 1: 1-8

Imagine a country that has witnessed radical and rapid change over previous decades. Imagine you are in a small country, vulnerable to the movements of powerful external economic forces. These forces have changed the fabric of society over the years leading to a general feeling of loss of orientation and mistrust of old institutions. The values of secularism are all pervasive. Being faithful to God is no longer considered necessary by a significant proportion of the population. Religious leaders are divided about how to respond. Some recommend accommodation with the secular rulers. Others, though are forming new faith communities and setting up shop in new locations. The result is division in the ranks; constant bickering and mistrust between various factions of believers.

The situation I am describing, of course, is the first century Palestine to whom John the Baptist first preached his message. John the Baptist was a pretty curious character. He bursts on to the scene with the words, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Repent! Turn back to God.” I suspect we would be shocked if John turned up here to church. John lived in the wilderness. He had never shaved or cut his hair. He wore camel skin and ate wild honey and locusts. He would be a perfect fit at the Wild Food Festival on the West Coast. The curious part of me wonders what he smelt like – I doubt if he washed very often if at all. His appearance would certainly have raised our eyebrows. Nevertheless, the people John addressed were waiting for something. Their hearts were filled with a longing for God. They yearned so much for the coming of his Messiah that they went out to view this novel looking character in great numbers indeed.

So here he is, an odd looking character, creating all this excitement, gathering all Judea and Jerusalem to hear his message. But it is a message of *repentance*. What are we to make of this? John’s message was a hard one. If he had been proclaiming repentance to those occupying pagans, the Romans, and all the other pagan people that they brought with them, then perhaps his message would seem palatable. You and I would easily go along with everything John has to say. But John was not preaching to “those people over there” as it were. John’s message of repentance was for the faithful. It was to the people of God that the call to repentance was addressed. This makes John’s message surprising, if not shocking.

Here is why. The people John addressed were an oppressed people. Have you ever tried to tell an oppressed people they need to repent! Usually oppressed people know and tell the story of their oppression well. It might be a story like the Exodus: the story of the evil empire. The high point is God sending a leader like Moses who routs the oppressing army so that the people can be set free. Usually, the call to repentance is addressed to the oppressor like the Egyptians or the Babylonians. That kind of message is easy, even populist to proclaim. But John's message is not for them. His call to repentance is addressed to his own people. That message of repentance was, of course, the very sermon that the Hebrew people had been preaching to their pagan neighbours for centuries. It was them to whom they had been saying, "Turn to God. Repent and submit to the baptism of cleansing and forgiveness of sins." Imagine the stir created when that very same sermon is turned around and addressed to the people of God! It is little wonder John was arrested!

Our task today is to hear John's call to repentance being addressed to us. It is a message we have to hear too. We are the people to whom the call to repentance is made. It is you and me who need to hear John's call to repent; not those people out there who seemingly ignore God day by day.

The word "repent" is translated from the Greek word *metanoia*. Sometimes we think of repentance in terms of saying sorry for bad behaviour. Repentance is more than that. The word *metanoia* carries with it the sense of completely turning around, seeing things from a new perspective. In this church there is a gospel procession where the gospel book is carried down into the middle of the church. The point of doing that is that we are forced to physically turn around to hear the gospel. This is a reminder that the gospel calls us to turn our lives around. That "about face" is what *metanoia* is all about. *Metanoia* is about a change of outlook, a reorientation of the personality. It involves turning back to friendship with God and accepting the responsibility and dignity of being made in God's image.

Repentance is one of the ways we can prepare for the coming of the Kingdom in our lives. The point is that the reign of God is drawing near, but we will not be able to see it if we are facing the wrong way, or if we have not opened our eyes to seeing the work of God going on all around us. Repentance is an ongoing process. It is a process of renewal, of intentional growing into selfhood and growing toward God. We need to continually ask God in our prayer to help us, to lead us in the paths of righteousness as Psalm 23 puts it, and to point out to us those parts of ourselves that need moulding and transforming.

John's preaching called the people of Israel to repent from the arrogant assumption that they alone were favoured, that they were the proprietors of the faith. He called them to repent from their smug belief that they were somehow better than their neighbours, that they were "in" with God while everybody else was "out." "Repent!" he says. "Unload patterns of behaviour that are fruitless. Turn your lives around! Lift up your eyes and be ready to greet your Saviour when he comes." So it is with us. Repentance is ongoing. It is a process of continually letting go of unhealthy patterns of behaviour and turning to God and growing toward God. Repentance is about making a total revolution of our lives and allowing God the potter to shape us. One pattern of behaviour I would appreciate some collective reflection about is language about what "we" do at St Mark's (or St Anne's). Often it's used at moments when folk are feeling a sense of pride in this place. "Well this is St Mark's and this is what we do!" It is sometimes used defensively when someone wants something important to left alone. The word "we" here is unhelpful because immediately it creates a sense in which there is a whole collection of people making up the "we" group which means some people are on the outside. Some folk can be particularly sensitive to this and hear an unintended exclusivity that says, "I don't belong here." Healthy communication uses "I" statements. For example, "Good hospitality is important to me and so I try and do it well for my church."

The path of repentance is a journey. The journey of change can be difficult and challenging. Indeed, as we travel this journey we are aware that the highway takes us through the desert wilderness. We encounter the cross on this journey. It is the signpost pointing us to the Promised Land for which we yearn. When we come to the cross that is the place we can leave our burdens and our hurts and our unhealthy behaviours, so that we can begin the process of healing and renewal and recreation in Christ.

The season of Advent is often a busy one. There is always so much to do before Christmas. More than ever, these busy times are when we need to pray, to be with God. In your prayer this week, review with God the luggage you are carrying in your journey; your struggles, your grief, your hurts and bruises and your weaknesses. Ask God to show you the parts of yourself in need of healing, restoration and renewal. Ask God to show you a straight path; a path home to the Promised Land. Pray that God may transform us all and renew this faith community, so that with John, we too may be the voice in the wilderness, proclaiming the Good News of God.