

MATTHEW 3:1-12
RADICAL TRANSFORMATION

What place did John Baird and Andrew Hardie have in the history of Scotland? Until a few weeks ago I had never heard of them, nor of the Radical War that took place in 1820 in Scotland. Baird and Hardie were weavers who had seen their wages fall by half in the years up to 1820; there was a call for a general strike in April 1820; some were taken by the American Revolution and its ideals; only 1 in 250 people in Scotland had the vote and these men saw the political system as corrupt. So they called for reform, for a radical reform of the system, to deal with their economic hardship and with people being powerless to change anything for themselves. The Scottish Radical War was an attempt to change things at the very root of Scottish Society. It failed; Baird and Hardie and others were arrested and tried and executed in Stirling in Aug 1820 for their part in this Radical War. 2 years later Sir Walter Scott created a very different picture of Scotland when King George IV came to visit.

We're not usually very good at dealing with people we describe as radical! Who are today's radicals – there is a list created by *The Observer* and you can find it on-line. These are people who are challenging society and what we see as the status quo and are agitating for change; they offer us a glimpse of what they see as a better society. We need to be clear about one thing: people use the word “radical” of some preachers today when they mean “extreme”; these are different ideas; “radical” means “root” and radicals take us back to our roots; “extremists” have a different agenda! Nowadays, we tend not to execute people who want to change things in that kind of radical way, but those who ask these questions feel as if people don't take them seriously. We need radicals; otherwise we become complacent, stuck in a rut of just accepting things as they are. We find radical people uncomfortable because they challenge us, they challenge the way we think, they challenge accepted norms, ideas, and customs. We are poorer if that challenge is not heard. “Radical” meets “root”; radicals take us back to our roots, reminding us what is important.

John the Baptist was a Bible radical. We heard about him earlier: he didn't fit into the normal picture of the rabbi in any normal Jewish way; he lived in the desert; he wore strange clothes and had an unusual diet. The establishment didn't quite know what to make of John, but people listened to him, and responded to the challenge of his radical message. Most of all, he was preparing the way for Jesus. John was radical because he was calling people back to the roots of their faith and their relationship with God; they had lost their way and they needed to be brought back to see what was important in faith and life. By doing that, John was preparing the way for Jesus' coming. Who was John? “A voice...” (*Matthew 3:2*) That quote from Isaiah 40 set John; he is a voice calling people to prepare for the coming of the Lord, making the road ready, getting the path straight. Some people saw that and listened to him; others didn't and were angry!

“Repent...” (*Matthew 3:2*) That was John's radical message. That was substance of his ministry, calling people to repent. Repentance is all about a complete change of mind and heart. People are to change the way they think, the way they behave and John was calling anyone who would listen to him to make that change. He saw a people who had forgotten God and needed to rediscover faith; he saw people who were living in any old way and needed to rediscover what it meant to walk in the ways of the Lord. Repentance was key to making that change, a change that went right to the root of their attitudes, and their way of life. Most of all, he saw a people who needed to be made ready for the coming of Messiah, the Son of God, people who needed to have their hearts opened to the idea that God is at work in the world. A radical preacher preached about repentance!

People reacted in two ways. Some loved John. They listened to him and saw that he was right. They responded to his ministry by taking him seriously; they came and were baptised as an outward sign of the inward attitude of repentance, the water washing away their sin

symbolically. They not only listened, but we presume they changed the way they lived their lives; they walked in the ways of the Lord and became new people. Some became disciples of this radical preacher and we know from later stories that John pointed them to Jesus so that they could become disciples of the One who was greater than John. They took his message to heart and they became different people, root and branch.

But others didn't like John. The leaders of the Jews came to see what John was all about. They stood on the banks of river watching, listening to all that was going on. They listened to John preach; they watched John baptise, disapprovingly! "*You brood...*" (*Matthew 3:7f*) These Jews didn't need to repent, they thought! They were Jews after all! John saw that they were corrupt; out only for themselves; making themselves rich at others' expense, at the expense of the poor, and he saw that their religion was a sham, an outward show, with no substance. "*Produce...*" (*Matthew 3:8*) "We don't need..." "Yes, you do!" They were being given a picture of a new way, a better life, a life of faith and of right living, but they didn't want it, so they rejected John and later he would die for his ministry, with Herod unhappy at this radical man's criticism of his lifestyle.

It is good for us to read about John in the season of Advent. This season is about waiting for Jesus and preparing to celebrate Christmas. John reminds us to remember what is at the root of Christmas! His challenge for us is to see through all the trappings of the way we celebrate this season of year, to the root of that celebration. What is Advent all about? Cards, shopping, food, parties? We love doing these things, but they are not the root of the season; the root of the season is preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus and if that gets lost under the snowstorm of other things, then we need John to remind us of what really matters in this season. He points us to Jesus, how great Jesus is and what Jesus has done for us and for the world. Without that radical challenge, Christmas is poorer.

This is not just about Christmas; this is about life and what matters in life, faith, and religion. Paul in Romans 15 has two threads that help us to see what matters. Both are about relationships. The first thread is about our relationship with God: "*May...*" (*Romans 15:13*) Here is something of what God is like, the God who gives hope to our hearts and elsewhere God who loves and accepts us, God who has promised good things to us and Jesus has become our servant to save us. In reply to that, we are called to glorify God and trust Him. It is a quite simple and quite basic thing: God has done great things for us and we respond by loving and trusting God. Christian faith is about that relationship. We make faith, life, and religion so complex when we add in other rules and regulations and sometimes faith gets buried under the snowstorm of other things, things that get in way of us discovering faith and living by that faith. The root of being a Christian is here: God has done great things for us to give us hope; we live by faith and we trust in God. Rediscover Christianity at its roots!

The second thread is about relationships with other people. "*Accept...*" (*Romans 15:7*) Our relationships with one another are to reflect the way in which God has blessed us. Second to our relationship with God these matter. How many churches work hard to get the details of things right, but forget this! We get worship just so; we get the rotas working well; we sort out budgets and mission statements, and our buildings are great, but we forget to make sure that our relationships are right with one another. Paul highlights just one way of expressing this: acceptance of one another by grace! We criticise one another; we blame; we gossip about other people behind their backs; we do all sorts of things that break down the relationships. Do we accept one another? Accepting one another is about the way we see other people. Acceptance is about being part of a family, being at home amongst us, with the sense that we are part of that family, regardless. We are accepted as we are; it doesn't matter how we dress; it doesn't matter that children make a noise; it doesn't matter that you don't know when to sit and when to stand; that's acceptance! Sometimes I think we confuse toleration with acceptance: we tolerate other people and the fact that they're different; we tolerate noisy children – just! We tolerate people who are new. But acceptance is much bigger, deeper:

acceptance treats people as equals, that others are people just like us and you are welcome; that is the root of Christian living! We're not always as good at that as we like to think! Relationships with other people are at the root of being Christian; that's the challenge we face, to remember that and get it right!

Radicals take us back to our roots, back to what really matters; they offer us a view of a better life. John offers us a view of life that is Christ-centred! He was preparing people to meet Jesus and he called them back to their roots. They were to discover a relationship with God; they were to discover relationships with other people; John called it repentance, a change of heart and mind. There is a reminder here for us that takes us back to our roots: to love God because God has loved us; to love others because God has loved us! Advent takes us back to our roots in celebrating Jesus and His coming; this Advent take up this radical challenge, to see through all the other stuff to roots of our Christian faith; rediscover what it means to love and trust the Lord; rediscover a deep sense of love for one another. Without these, our Advent will be so much poorer and so will we!

