

MATTHEW 3:1-12
FRUIT IN KEEPING...

I wonder what you make of John the Baptist? He is an eccentric character! Where he lived made him eccentric – in the desert! What he wore made him eccentric – camel hair clothes. What he ate made him eccentric – locusts and wild honey! He might not be top of our list for a lunch date or a dinner party! He is a prophet; people don't know how to handle prophets; he was a rare breed even in Israel in the first century since there had not been many prophets for a long time; people were not sure what to make of them. Nobody really wanted prophets in their front room because they tended to make people uncomfortable and still do to some extent. The prophetic voice can be an embarrassment to the establishment. There are lots of things to count against him but we throw John away at our peril; he is a wonderful role model for Christian mission because he points people to Jesus and to the kingdom of God. He tells people what they need to know: God is King and that Jesus is coming to bring the kingdom of God in a new way.

“Repent...” (Matthew 3:2) I've driven the M25 on two occasions, there and back again! Now the M25 is a circle, so whichever way you go you get to the place you want eventually. When I got to the M25, the sat nav that I was following told me that I had gone the wrong way. And it spent the next twenty minutes plotting me a new route. The first part of that new route involved turning round to go in the other direction; I would have to leave the motorway at the next junction and re-join the M25 going in the other direction. I didn't listen! Repentance is turning to go in another direction, a change in our lives that changes the way we think, what we believe and the way we live. Human nature by instinct takes us away from God; it leads us to go our own way, to create our own values centred on ourselves. Repentance challenges us to change that way of being and living, to focus on Jesus, to follow Jesus and live for Him. It is a complete change of direction.

This was John's message; it is quite uncompromising! He was preparing people to meet Jesus. This was their spiritual preparation for meeting Messiah, for hearing about the kingdom of God. Repentance was God's way of making people's hearts ready to hear about grace and love and forgiveness and salvation. That message of repentance was God's way of making people ready for what they would hear from Jesus and see in Him. There are lots of old buildings in Edinburgh and people have wanted to build something new on the site; before you can build, you have to clear away old the building, knock down what is already there and clear the site and then it is ready for the new building to rise out of the dust. That is what John is doing: repentance is about clearing away all the old “me” so that Jesus can build a new “me” in its place. The new building is a people who are ready to love God and follow Jesus.

Needless to say, this message of repentance got a mixed reaction. Some loved John and some argued with him. Those who loved him, who thought what he said was right, embraced the whole message of repentance; these were the people whom he baptised in the Jordan. They came confessing their sins and John baptised them, a sign of their being made clean, getting rid of all the old ways and embracing the idea of the new that is to come. Some of these people went on to meet Jesus and some went on to follow Him, taking John's word for it and doing just what he wanted them to do. It seems strange, doesn't it. Why would people respond positively to a message that basically says “you've made mistakes; you need to change”? But there are times when we recognise that this is true; there are times when we know we've made mistakes and got things wrong; there are times when we've seen that life is out of kilter, our priorities are wrong, our values need correcting and we're persuaded that we need to change, and so repentance is a message we need to hear. We know it and we embrace change!

But there is another side: obviously some people didn't respond well at all to John! The religious leaders appear on scene, come to investigate John! He notices them and they suffer.

This is the prophet at his best or worst, depending on your point of view! “*You brood...*” (*Matthew 3:7*) I hope he’s not trying to win them as friends! There are two big ideas in what John says: first, “*produce fruit...*” (*Matthew 3:8*) and second, “*do not...*” (*Matthew 3:9*) These were escape doors for religious leaders: “we’re religious, that’s enough; don’t you know who we are, we’re descended from Abraham, that’s enough!” They thought they could escape from this “repentance” message by these claims, privileges, and honours. They didn’t need to listen; they didn’t need to repent; they had it all already and that was enough!

These escape doors didn’t work for John. “*Produce fruit...*” (*Matthew 3:8*) How you live matters! The kind of people you are is so important. The kind of people you are on the outside reveals what you are like on the inside. John Stott compares the Christmas tree to the fruit tree: the Christmas tree gets its colour and decoration from baubles and lights that are tied on to it, just like behind me; it is a lovely tree and thanks to those who put it up last week; but Christmas trees get their colour by things being tied on. The fruit tree, on the other hand, bears fruit from the life inside it; apples, pears, bananas all grow on fruit trees; they are the fruit of the life inside the tree. Repentance and the new life inside us create fruit on the outside: faith, love, kindness, patience. Paul lists nine different fruit of spirit in Galatians chapter 5, go and have a look; this fruit comes from the right attitude inside us; the religious leaders who came to investigate John didn’t have that right spirit in them at all; John saw no fruit!

“Don’t claim to be children of Abraham!” “*I tell...*” (*Matthew 3:9*) Do you know who your ancestors were? Where did they come from? What have you inherited from them? Have you inherited attitudes, genes (obviously), looks? Is there anything that we inherit from our ancestors that makes a difference to our salvation? What a great question that is! How many of us learned Christian faith from a family member, our mother, father, grandma? How many generations in your family have been Christians? I grew up in the life of the Church, as did my mother before me; I’ve never known what it is not to be part of a church family, except for a few years as a teenager when I tried to kick against it. But I still had to say “yes” to Jesus in my own voice; I still had to embrace Christian faith as “mine” rather than my mother’s. I had heard the story, but it still needed to be me! The religious leaders saw their ancestors but forgot to make the story their own.

Escape doors don’t work; we can’t escape the challenge of repentance. In a real sense we wouldn’t want to escape the challenge, because this is the way to Jesus. This is the way to grace! Both John and Jesus saw that! Ever since then, generations of Christians have begun their relationship with Jesus by recognising our faults and failings and that we need to set things right, that we need a new set of values. The gospel has done its work: first by that challenge and then by showing us Jesus and how good He is. We then see what a great Saviour and Lord that Jesus is, how He is worthy of our trust, what He has done for us especially in His death and resurrection. Some of us have tried escape doors, but they haven’t worked for us and gospel has done its work in our lives and we are saved, forgiven and blessed by Jesus, and we belong to Him.

That’s the heart of Advent: Jesus has come to save. John is a voice preparing the way for Jesus’ coming, preparing our hearts to hear the good news of a Saviour. A voice, a prophet, pointing to Jesus. Let the church be prophetic this Christmas, pointing people to Jesus. Let Advent be time for us to affirm Jesus as Saviour, maybe even for 1st time; or re-affirm again that He is Saviour. Repentance is not something we do once, but something we do every day, turning away from the old ways, from our mistakes, turning back to Jesus. The gospel will be at work in us to produce fruit, to help us be the right kind of people, full of grace to one another, love, patience and compassion. Every day, let us say “yes” to Jesus in our own voice and walk in the Lord’s ways.