

God wants our true selves to shine out

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Advent 2 – Matt 3.1-12

There's an apocryphal story of a journalist asking the Archbishop of Canterbury what he'd do if he learned that Jesus was coming in the next half hour.

The answer: 'I'd look busy.' Do you think it would help?

John the Baptist called his people to *Prepare the way of the Lord*. He challenged people to do it through repentance – and by that, he meant a complete change of direction in life; a complete transformation.

Dictionary: *μετάνοια (metanoia) 'repentance' – change of mind, the state of changing any or all of the elements composing one's life: attitude, thoughts, and behaviours concerning the demands of God for right living; this state can refer to the foundational salvation event in Christ, or to on-going repentance in the Christian life.*

Prepare the way of the Lord. Advent is far more than getting ready for a one-off event or a casual visit – we're not rolling out a red carpet for a VIP's whistle-stop. No, God's coming to the world is much more than a single event. It changes everything; everything changes for ever; everything; for ever.

John the Baptist tells us that the way to prepare for God's coming is to repent: to turn from the priorities we serve – especially any greed or selfishness or apathy – and to live as genuine citizens of God's realm; to make God's priorities our own, and live them out.

For Christians, repentance is ongoing because it means taking on a life-long commitment to following the example of Jesus – to live a courageous life committed to justice, mercy and faithfulness (*the weightier matters of the Law that he referred to in Mt 23.23*). Jesus took on that risky, radical lifestyle and it led to his crucifixion. That's his example to us; his challenge to us. Are we that serious? Are justice, mercy and faithfulness important enough to us that we'd risk everything for them – life included?

But that was Jesus; what about ... people? Let's look at how John the Baptist walked that walk. He also walked it to the end. How could he do that? Was he some sort of rebel with a cause? Two weeks ago, the Song of Zechariah was our Psalm. It's stayed with me. Zechariah was John the Baptist's Dad. Telling the children, the story behind his song reminded us that Zechariah was a priest working in the Temple in Jerusalem. ^{Lk 1.5-25, 57-80} So John the Baptist was a PK – a priest's kid. The Aaronic priesthood was hereditary; but John never took his father's place in the Temple.

We met John preaching today not in the Temple, but in the wilderness. Instead of rich Temple vestments, John wore what the desert provided; the hair of moulting camels tied on with a skin belt – like Elijah did before him ^{2 Kgs 1:8}. And like Elijah, he ate what the desert provided ^{1 Kgs 17:4}; wild honey and locusts. He was very *alternative*. John answered God's call to be the itinerant radical preacher we meet in the Gospel. When his Dad's colleagues, the Pharisees and Sadducees came out to him, he confronted them with the threat that after Christ's baptism, there'd be nothing left of them. Through his asceticism, John lived out his call to turn from all the finery and lavish lifestyle that had displaced the justice, mercy and faithfulness God wanted of religious leaders.

What of us? I've said before that the baptism John called people to was very counter cultural. Baptism back then was

normally part of conversion; leaving your birth religion behind to embrace Judaism. So, the people who came from Judea and Jerusalem to John at the Jordan technically didn't need baptism. But John was saying that cradle Jews or not, they needed it anyway. They needed to wash, and cleansed, turn back to faithful living. Their heritage as Abraham's children was not of itself all that God required of them.

And that's the challenge of today's Gospel for us – whether we're cradle Christians or new converts. Have we been tranquillised by a faith that proclaims comfort and security, a cousin of the health and wealth gospel?

Martin Luther King caricatured that as our being seduced by *popular preachers delivering soothing sermons on How to Be Happy and How to Relax. Some have been tempted to revise Jesus' command to read, "Go ye into all the world, keep your blood pressure down, and lo, I will make you a well-adjusted personality."* A knock at midnight Lk 11.5 ff – 11

6-67 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=460_76M6y7E God wants better than that; we are better than that. God wants our true selves to shine out. Our faith should bear the fruit of the repentance that John called for – justice, mercy and faithfulness.

Advent is our opportunity to identify the things which keep us spiritually dormant and to turn away from them. When we want to know how to do that, remember John the Baptist; remember Jesus. Let's test our own inclinations above the Bunsen burners of justice, mercy and faithfulness. When we see dross rise to the surface, we are to skim it off and bin it. What remains in the crucible will be the self that Jesus wants us to continue giving to our work in the Kingdom. Who will that be, that self? In the healing prayer now, we might want to come forward and offer our search for that self to God's anointing. Amen.