

Homily for Advent 2, 2020

Mark 1:1-8

'Repentance'

Pastor Joshua Pfeiffer

*

INTRODUCTION

Dear people of God,
your Lord calls **you** to **repent**.

This is the very simple message our text impresses upon us.

That each and every person here today,

each and every person watching online,

young or old,
rich or poor,
religious or irreligious,
regular or visitor,

the Lord calls **you** to **repent** -

Which is to acknowledge that in your life that is not aligned with God.

to confess those sins,

to turn away from them,

to turn to God for forgiveness and mercy,

and to live the new life God lays out for you.

Dear people of God,
the Advent *season*,
is to be a season of **repentance**.

And to stir this up in us,
Our text sets before us the powerful figure of John the Baptist.

The great preacher of repentance.

And as we work through our text we'll consider four things in connection with the theme of repentance,

the **picture** of repentance,
the **call** to it,
the **embodiment** of it
and the **goal** of it.

*

PICTURE OF REPENTANCE

So first is the *picture* of the repentance.

What do I mean by this?

Well, we're introduced to John the Baptist, by way of some Old Testament quotations,

which have a basic picture behind them.

See if you can get it?

*"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will **prepare your way**,
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,
'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight'.*

Our text makes clear that these are prophecies of John the Baptist,

he's the *messenger* sent ahead of the Lord Jesus,

he's the *voice* crying out in the wilderness,

he's the *preparer* of the way,

and as the text goes on it's made clear that the way in which John does this preparing, is by calling people to repentance.

But before we get there,
What's the picture here of repentance?

The picture is of a straight and smooth road being made through a desert region for the Lord to travel on.

So imagine a desert.

Deserts are not normally places you think of as having roads and clear paths.

That's one of things that makes deserts dangerous.

Think back to the Israelites' journey through the wilderness coming out of Egypt...

Even if you've ever just gone off the main track when you're four-wheel driving or bushwalking, you know how quickly you can become disoriented in a desolate region without clear tracks.

So even just having a path, a road, a way, in a wilderness region at all, is significant.

But then it's another thing to have a *smooth* and *straight* road.

Whenever I read this,
I think of my time in Brisbane,

for those of you who know Brisbane you know the road system is very different from Adelaide.

Adelaide was a very carefully planned city and is very orderly.

A grid of streets in the city centre,

four main roads going out at about exactly 45-degree angles from the city,
and so on.

Whereas in Brisbane,
the roads seem to go here, there and everywhere.

Partly it's because it's much hillier and there are rocky outcrops all over the place,

But also because of the way Brisbane began and developed,

my understanding is,
that the road system sort of just happened organically around everything else,
and in many places apparently roads follow old cattle tracks.

So the roads are not straight,
they twist and turn,
they go up and down,

and as a new person learning that city it can be quite hard to get your bearings.

The picture in those OT prophecies,
is that the Lord is coming through the wilderness that is hilly and rocky and has valleys,

but a smooth and straight road is prepared for him,

a way for him which means he can get to his people easily.

This is the picture of repentance.

Our next point then is about how that picture is applied.

The call to repentance with the connected baptism of John.

*

CALL TO REPENTANCE

*‘John the baptiser appeared in the wilderness,
proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.
And people from the whole Judean countryside
and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him,
and were baptised by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins’.*

So,
There’s a prophecy quoted about the preparing of a way through the desert,

And it’s applied to John the Baptist,

But then it doesn’t say that John appeared in the wilderness driving a front-end loader,
Working with grater with a team of workers to build a new expressway.

This is not a literal physical road to any particular city,

this is,
if you like,
about a *spiritual* way,
John’s is a spiritual **preparation**,

the baptism – or the ritual washing – of John’s that goes along with this repentance,
points as well to this same truth,

that the people had this deep sense of needing to be cleansed,

this is about preparing a road for God into the human heart,

a way for the Lord Jesus,
to come into your life.

John is saying that Jesus the King is coming,

And it’s important to be clear that our call to prepare,
Doesn’t mean we do anything to make him come,

That’s all God’s initiative,
That’s grace,

God comes **to us** in Christ Jesus,

The king **is** coming,

But then on our side there is something about the way we receive him,
Which can be made more or less difficult.

We can,
with God’s help by the work of the Spirit,

clear a path,
through repentance.

Another way of saying this would be,

That you prepare for the Lord Jesus,
by **acknowledge** your **need** for him.

*

And did you notice,

how popular John's ministry of calling to repentance was!

We read that people flocked to John from that whole region.

The Gospel writer Mark seems to be engaging in a bit of hyperbole here,
When he says **all** the people of Jerusalem went out to him,

But we get the point,

John was a big deal,

People were drawn out to him in big numbers,

He even gets a mention outside of the New Testament in the Jewish historian Josephus,

And what's so interesting about the fact that he was this popular,

Is that his message was a confronting and challenging one,

It was a call to repentance!

His message was that people as they are,
are not okay.

And yet they flocked to him!

Now to be sure,
Not everyone liked this,

John's preaching of repentance actually ended up getting him beheaded as well,

But there is this positive response that's worth paying attention to.

So often today the Church shies away from the call to repentance because we think it will put people off.

But strangely,
There can be something about the call to repent which actually draws people.

I think you even see versions of this in the secular world.

An interesting one of the last few years is the psychologist Jordan Peterson, if you know his work.

He has thousands and thousands of people,
Especially young people,
Listening to his talks online and in person,

And in an interview he was asked **why** he thinks young people have been drawn to him,

And he said something very striking,

He said,
'because I tell them they're not okay'.

I tell them they're **not** okay.

So many people are told you're okay, you're okay, you're okay,

And all the while they **know** their life is out of alignment,
They **know** something's not right,
They want to find a better way,

So that when someone actually names that,
The conscience compels them to respond.

Now sadly the secular answer,
ends up throwing people back on your own resources,

Whereas the Christian gospel,
Tells of a God who can makes things right.

*

EMBODIMENT OF REPENTANCE

That'll be our last point for today,
But just briefly before we get there,

Note too the **embodiment** of repentance.

Did you hear these intriguing details we get about John?

'John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.'

Now in the first place,

This is signifying that John has come to do his work in the spirit and power of Elijah,
As the New Testament makes clear elsewhere.

This is how Elijah and some of the other prophets appeared in the Old Testament,

And now John comes as the last great prophet if you like.

But there's something about this too that I think **embodies** the sort of repentance John calls for.

In where he is,
What he wears,
What he eats,

All of this is in some way is about detaching from things of this world which can distract,
and even compete for our spiritual attention.

Here's how one of the commentators puts it,

*'The very appearance of John was a stern sermon.
It was a call to all those who made food and drink,
house and clothing their chief concern in life,
to turn from such vanities and provide far more essential things.
John was a living illustration of just how little we really need here below – something we are prone to forget.
In drawing people out into the wilderness after him John made them share a bit of his own austere life.
People left their mansions, offices, shops,
their common round of life
and for a time at least gave their thought to higher things'. Lenksi, 38*

Now it's not that any of these things are wrong in themselves,
Food and drink,
Nice clothes,
Houses and homes,

They can all be good gifts of God to be received with thanksgiving.

But there's something about John voluntarily going without them,

Which seems to sharpen his call to repentance.

Because even though these things can all be fine and good in themselves,

They are also things we are tempted to turn into idols aren't they?

The pleasure of food and drink,

The security of house and home,

The status of appearance and popularity,

To the extent to which these sorts of things become our focus and the places we look to for strength in this life,

They can be the potholes and the obstacles in our life that need to be cleared away by repentance.

I don't know about you,
But at this time of year as the silly season ramps up,
This is something I need to hear again and again.

Don't let frantic obsessions with material things dull your spiritual sense!

To the extent it has and does,

Repent.

*

GOAL OF REPENTANCE

So there was the picture,
The call,
The embodiment,

And finally,
And most importantly,
There is the **goal** of repentance.

7(John) proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

As I've said,
John was a big deal.

He was very popular.

Jesus even says at one point he's the greatest human being who had ever lived up until that point.

But John says,
Compared to the one coming after me,
I'm nothing.

I'm not even worthy to bend down, grovel at his feet,
and do the most menial task imaginable for him,

He's so great,
He's so important,
I'm not even up scratch to be his slave.

You think my baptism is important?

Well, yes it is,
My washing which, in a sense, acts out your repentance and opens up the way to the forgiveness of sins,

Yes it is important,

But it's such a small thing compared with what the one coming after me is going to do.

Because He's going to wash you,
He's going to cleanse you,
He's going to pour over you God's very own Holy Spirit.

The goal of repentance is Jesus, the coming one.

The goal of repentance is not to dwell on our sins,
The goal of repentance is not to get stuck in our failures,
The goal of repentance is not to ruminate on the ways in which our lives aren't all they should be,

Just as the goal of clearing a path and paving a new road,
is not to pull up a chair and look at the pile of rubble off to the side,

It's not even to sit there looing at the road,

The goal is to use the road,
To get somewhere,

Or better yet,
To get to someone,

Or better yet,

So that someone,
Gets to you.

The goal of repentance,

Is to meet the Lord Jesus Christ,
To receive him, and all the good things he has for you.

And the next surprise after our text,
Is that this coming one,
This greater one,

Jesus Christ the Son of God,

He comes and is himself baptised by John,

He steps into the water In solidarity with us sinners,
Even though he himself had no sin.

This begins his journey to the cross,
Where He will give his life for you,
Where he will rise again from the dead,
So that he can bring that forgiveness of sins John speaks of,
And the new life which flows from it.

He ascends to his Father's right hand and pours out the Holy Spirit upon the church,

Cleanses and washes and sanctifying his people with the Spirit of God,
Baptising them with the Holy Spirit.

It's receiving him,
Knowing him,
Living in him and by his strength,

That's the goal of repentance,

That's why there's even joy in repentance.

As each of you received all this in your baptism.

Still this very day this grater one the Lord Jesus is here among us,

Bringing his gifts to his repentant people,

Gifts of forgiveness, life and salvation.

*

CONCLUSION

There was the picture of repentance,

The call to repentance,

The embodiment of repentance,

And the goal of repentance.

Whoever you are,

Your Lord calls you to repent,

To confess your sins,
To turn to God for mercy,
And to walk in the new life he brings.

God grant it to us for Jesus' sake, Amen.