

4 December 2022;      Matthew 3:1-12; 2 Advent; Pastor Fraser Pearce

Let's get straight into the text: **In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'**

This is taking place before Jesus has begun his public ministry.

In fact, up to this point in Matthew's Gospel we have only heard

About Jesus' birth and early childhood.

Now John comes on the scene,

And he's called John *the Baptist*.

Let's pause here: to baptise something means to wash it.

So, the Greek word *baptizo* is the normal word used

For washing anything from pots and pans to couches.

John is calling people to repent,

That is, to turn away from their sin and to turn back to God,

And he is washing them in the Jordan river,

A washing that is connected to the people confessing their sins.

Now this can be confusing for Christian people,

Because we talk a lot about baptism,

And we can think that John's baptism is the same as Jesus' baptism,

But it's good for us to pause and remember

That the washing that we have as Christian people,

Baptism in the name of the Triune God,

Was started *not* by John the Baptist, *but by Jesus*,

And that he instituted it in his resurrection.

Listen again to these famous words from the end of Matthew's Gospel: **Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'** Matthew 28

So, Jesus was starting something new:

A baptism that does not simply prepare us to receive Jesus,

But that actually makes us his disciples, his students.

It's as his baptised people, his disciples, his students,

That we then hold on to his commands,

And grow together sharing in his mindset, his attitude.

That John's baptism is different from the baptism Jesus' started,

Is also clear from the Book of Acts.

Listen to this: **While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the inland regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. He said to them, ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?’ They replied, ‘No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.’ Then he said, ‘Into what then were you baptized?’ They answered, ‘Into John’s baptism.’ Paul said, ‘John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.’ On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied— altogether there were about twelve of them.** Acts 18

Ok, so today we are dealing with John’s baptism,  
A washing that turned people back to God,  
And prepared them to receive the coming Messiah.

With this in mind, listen to these words from our reading: **But when [John] saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism...**

It’s easy for us to think of the Pharisees and Sadducees as the same,  
But if you keep your eyes open as you read the Gospels  
It’s quickly evident that they had some big differences,  
Some big disagreements.

It’s true that the Pharisees and Sadducees were all Jewish,  
And we’ll come back to this point,  
But, generally speaking, the Pharisees believed in a resurrection,  
The Sadducees didn’t.

The Pharisees accepted as authoritative the books  
Of the Old Testament that we read out in church,  
The Sadducees accepted only the first five books.  
The Pharisees were awaiting the Messiah, David’s Son,  
The Sadducees were not.

But these differences were not as significant to John  
As the attitude of pride and presumption that he saw both groups:

Again, the text says, **But when [John] saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism,**

Or, as the NIV translates, **coming to where he was baptising,**

It is not evident to me from the Greek

That they were actually coming to get baptised

As much as showing up to see what was happening,

**But when [John] saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?’**

John lumps both groups together, they are a brood of vipers,

And he asks them what seems to me

To be a question loaded with irony:

No one actually warned them to escape from the wrath to come,

Suffering God's judgement was the last thing in their minds.  
They simply showed up not thinking that they needed to repent,  
But to see what was happening.  
At least, that's how I take it.

However we may differ in our interpretation at this point,  
What John goes on to say is a clear warning to them,  
And to us, if we think that turning back to God,  
Is simply a matter of theory, and not of action.  
Listen to what John says: **Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.**

Evidently both the Pharisee and the Sadducees were tempted  
To think that their Jewish identity rendered them immune  
From suffering the penalty of breaking God's law.  
John was telling them the prophetic word they needed to hear:  
That God looks not for our pedigree,  
But for the fruits of repentance in our lives.

This is a good prophetic word for us to hear as well.  
One the one hand we do well to trust  
That because we are baptised into Christ  
We do really belong to God's people: Abraham is our ancestor too.  
But if we think that this means that we can live how we please  
Without any consequences, then we deceive ourselves.  
This is how St Paul puts it in Galatian 6,  
Using similar imagery to today's reading: **Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up.**  
Again, this is prophetic teaching that helps us in the life of faith:  
God gives us a new identity so that we may live a new life,  
A life where the fruit of the Spirit grows in and among us.

John's prophetic message ends with these words: **'I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'**  
This reminds us that John was preparing the way for Jesus,

And that John understand that the Messiah was coming  
With a cleansing fire to bring God's righteousness to earth.

Now the mysterious thing is that directly after our reading,  
Jesus comes to John, and receives his baptism, his washing.  
What's going on there we don't have time to look at today,  
But as we close, I'd like to draw your attention to Matthew 11.

John has landed in prison for preaching without fear

The prophetic word of God, and we hear this: **When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.'**

What does the awaited for Messiah bring?

Healing, freedom, and the comfort of the Gospel.

True repentance does not consist only in being sorry for our sin,

Or even in confessing our sin,

But in trusting that in Christ we have healing and life from God.

It's as we trust this message, that God grows the fruit of the Spirit

In and among us.

So, this Advent, as God's baptised people,

As people who have Abraham as our ancestor, and belong to God,

Let's hear God's prophetic word, admit that we have sinned,

And trust in Jesus,

Who brings us mercy and healing from God,

And frees us to be merciful and healing in our lives,

To the glory of the Father. In Jesus' name. Amen.