

Matthew 3:1-12 Sermon for 11am

As we prepare for Christmas, it's a good time to think about about what Christian faith really is. Perhaps you've come here your whole life and are familiar with the stories and the teachings, you read your bible, you pray, and you are in a good place with God. If that's you, then you will also know how far we all have to go in our faith and how it is good to take a step back occasionally to look with fresh eyes and be reminded about the amazing gift of Jesus. Perhaps you struggle in faith, and particularly struggle with explaining to other people why you are here on Sundays. Maybe you're not quite sure yourself. As we prepare for Christmas it's a good time to reassess and be reminded of why. Maybe you are sitting quietly this morning, not sure about this Christianity stuff at all but not wanting to admit it in church. If that's you, then this morning's reading gives you the time and space to think about what Christian faith is, whether it's trustworthy and whether you want to follow Jesus. So, wherever you are this morning, this reading gives us all the chance to listen again with fresh ears to the story of faith.

The first thing that happens this morning is the entry of the enigmatic figure of John the Baptist. Matthew, the writer, isn't interested in where he comes from – if you want to know you'll have to read the gospel of Luke. Instead, John appears outside the cities and towns in the wilderness. He's not part of the religious elite, and he's not part of the people in power. His food is typical of the very poor who had to eat what the land produced naturally. This wasn't a man who was after status, position, authority or power. He wasn't an old Etonian or an Oxbridge graduate who had been schooled to expect to lead. Instead, John appeared as a poor man, not part of the existing community systems and begins to proclaim.

The word 'proclaim', can also mean preach, or herald. But, importantly, it really means someone who announces the message they've been given to announce. This is like someone who is paid to announce the birth of a King, or like the returning officer at a General Election announcing the result of a vote. John isn't presenting his own thoughts or philosophy of life. He isn't a life-style guru, a life coach or a well-being specialist giving details of his latest fad diet. Instead, he's been given a message – the implication is that the message is from God – and his job is to proclaim it. The message isn't just John's thoughts, but instead is carrying God's authority.

So what was God's message for John to proclaim? "Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near." A simple message, but here is the story of the whole of Christianity in a nutshell. We'll spend the rest of our time looking at it.

Firstly, this isn't a new thing. John's preaching had been predicted from long ago. The prophet Isaiah, hundreds of years before, talked about John preparing the way for the Lord. Isaiah talks of making paths straight, removing blockages, for God's return to his people. John dresses like a prophet from the wilderness of old, and he performs this function of clearing the way for Jesus's coming. He prepares the way in what he proclaims and what he does. So what is he doing? What is this message that clears the path?

We've already noticed John's poverty. His message is clearly for all, not just for the elites. In fact, when the religious elite show up, John gives them a really hard time, questioning their motives and their reliance on their ancestry. He definitely doesn't mince his words, keeping some of the strongest condemnation in the whole bible for those who, at least on the surface, look like the most religious people.

John's message is for everyone. No one is too good to need to hear it, and no-one is too bad so they are excluded. No-one has done too much or too little. No-one is too old or too young. No-one is exempt from the need to repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is near. Anyone who thinks they are too good for this gets the harshest of treatment from John. Anyone who comes to John for the show, or the fad, or for the chance to look good, gets sent away humiliated. God's Kingdom isn't a place for showiness and hypocrisy. It's for everyone, but it's for everyone authentically.

John's message to everyone is Repent. It's a command, and it's for all of us. Repenting is changing your mind and behaviour. It's a complete change, not tinkering at the edges. It's like a train heading from Ilkley to Leeds, stopping at Menston and then turning around, and heading in the opposite direction. To Repent isn't covered by just trying to do good things. It's a complete life transformation, and a complete mind transformation. For John, the only response appropriate to the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven is an absolute transformation. Nothing stays the same once heaven has touched it. How could it?

What this looks like for us is a difficult thing to describe as I could be here all day! But let me say that real repentance means kissing goodbye to our own self-centred lives and embracing God as the centre. It is waving farewell to our personal narratives and life stories where we are the hero and it's all about us, and taking on the story of heaven where Jesus is the hero and we are supporting acts. It will naturally affect the way we live and the things we do or don't do, but it isn't superficial in that it is more than just that.

There are Christian ethics, but Christianity is not ethics. By repenting, I find myself in the story of heaven. By repenting I reject all other stories – the need for personal success, personal value, personal gain; the need for wealth and accumulation and financial security; the need to be beautiful, or young, or business savvy, or charitable, or the perfect parent, or significant in some way. I reject all this and live within the story of heaven. This is repentance.

Why repent? Because, John says, the Kingdom of Heaven has come near. What does this mean? This means that God has come to live with his people. He has come to reign among his followers. God has come, creating a new and everlasting country of righteousness and peace where evil is defeated and God's favour is poured out on all creation. This has come near, because Jesus has come. God's only Son has arrived and in him, God lives with his people. That's the Christian message in short. God has come to live with people.

John talks of baptism with water as a sign of repentance, but also baptism of the Holy Spirit as the sign of entry into the Kingdom of Heaven. It sounds judgmental in our reading, but really it is just accepting God's living within us and our place within the Kingdom of Heaven and its ongoing, unfolding history. Those who reject this Kingdom, reject its King, reject Jesus, and therefore reject all that is offered. In the metaphor of Kingdom, they are rebellious people refusing to accept what has happened – refusing to accept the Advent of a new King. All have been offered citizenship, some have refused. I don't want to dwell on this, as I haven't time, but John isn't revelling in judgment, but he is clear that God's Kingdom has come near and a choice is presented to us in its coming. God will not run rough-shod over our human free choice, but neither will he say that rebellion against his kingdom doesn't matter. No government would ignore rebellion and say it didn't matter! We are either living in God's kingdom in God's reign as part of heaven's narrative, or we are living in self-imposed exile, by our own narrative, placing ourselves as our own hero in our own story. There's no middle ground.

God, in Jesus, has drawn near. God lives with people because he loves us. We repent, not so we are good enough, but because we aren't good enough and need to find our place within heaven's kingdom and be saved from our own self-centred narratives. No matter who you are this morning, this is a choice we all face. Will we, each of us, accept Jesus as our hero and find our place within heaven's story and find our true home within heaven's kingdom? It isn't just another philosophy or fad or opinion; it's a real historical reality, a word from God himself to each of us, a divine invitation to live with God himself for ever.

A new dawn is offered to us. Will we choose to step into the sun?

Amen.