

## **Sermon, Second Sunday in Advent**

**Beverley, 10<sup>th</sup> December, 2023**

In Australia, where we usually think of locusts in plague proportions, have you ever wondered why John the Baptist ate them. It is my understanding that locusts are not unusual to the palate of the people of the Holy Land, and they are still eaten today. The wings and legs are torn off, bodies dried, roasted, or ground up and baked, and seasoned with salt. When mixed with honey, locusts provide a meal rich in protein, minerals and sugar and thereby would have given John the Baptist valuable sustenance during his preaching in the desert. If his diet is caused for comment, then so must be his wardrobe. If you were a fashion stylist, then you could claim he was going for the 'wild' look. Nonetheless, while wearing a garment made of camel's hair with a leather belt while standing in the desert under a hot sun isn't something we might picture as particularly comfortable or desirable, it is as the prophet Zechariah records in Chapter Thirteen of his Prophecy, somewhat customary clothing of a prophet.

St Mark doesn't include detail of John's wardrobe and diet to explain the practical reasons for them, but instead to highlight the deep symbolical significance they carry. John's clothing conveyed a message in itself. The people who came to John would identify him as a spokesman from God, and more particularly, the one of whom the Old Testament prophets had spoken. John's meal, so unusual to us, would have evoked memories of God's promise to the Israelites to bring them into their own land, a good land with abundant supply from God, a land flowing with milk and honey. Yet the locusts would also bring to remembrance God's judgment on Israel; his warning that he would send a locust plague to devastate the land, sparking a national fast and mourning, during which the people were called to "rend their hearts, not their garments."

As the Israelites came to John in the hot, uninhabited wilderness which in itself symbolised the spiritual state of the nation, they would have been reminded of their desert wanderings for forty years because of their grumbling and lack of faith. Yet as John stood there by the Jordan River, the location would have been striking for another reason: the Jordan was the gateway for Israel to enter into their new land that God had promised. Thus, the very location of John's ministry location was significant. It was time to repent—a time for new beginnings; John had been sent by God as the forerunner to Jesus: "After me will come one

more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

John's task was to confront the people so that their hearts could be prepared to receive their Saviour. Therefore, he preached a baptism of repentance. I think "Repentance" is a difficult word for human ears to hear; you might say for some it is thought laughable. Even among the Godly it is a word that grates in our ears and not least at this time of year. It's a word that doesn't fit readily with the Christmas cards we receive, the carols wafting through the speakers in the shopping centres, the tinsel, Christmas lights, and fake snow in the windows. As we take up our journey of Advent and wait in hope for our Lord's coming, I believe John's words in the wilderness are more relevant than ever. They remain God's words for us today, the church standing in the materialistic wasteland of our Western world. How might John's sermon be relevant to us today? Did God give us a level of pride so great that it excuses his commandment to love? Did He call us to be judge over our brother and sister and decide who is forgiven, and when? Did he call us to lift ourselves above others and to be indifferent and insensitive to their needs? Did he call us to become workaholics and work hard at winning the approval of others rather than serving Christ? What—or who—do we look to for our security, worth, approval and peace? If the affirmation of others, or the things we do—even our service to the church—or our accomplishments and achievements take the place of Christ, then they are all idols.

The word 'repent' means a complete about-face; a U-turn; something we can't actually do it by our own strength. The Good News in John's preaching of repentance is his preaching of a *baptism* of repentance. Baptism is the means for repentance and baptism is God's work. The change within comes after the washing. Through John's preaching in the wilderness, God led the people to John to be baptised, to cleanse and change the hearts of his people, so that by God's work in baptism they were now empowered to repent and prepare for Christ's coming.

The Good News of Advent is that God longs to forgive people and give them his peace. The purpose of repentance is to receive the forgiveness of sins. The word for forgive literally means to send away, to untie, to release. God knows that is not a work human beings can manage therefore he sent the One to whom John was pointing ahead. God made the paths straight all the way from heaven to earth when he sent Jesus into the world

for us and came to us when he baptised us with his Holy Spirit to make us holy. Through the preaching of God's Word, the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of his people and moves them to turn towards Jesus *with* their sins, for him to release them from those sins.

You could say it is a harsh world in which we live; even a wilderness, where people are lost and confused by so many competing ideologies about life and spirituality, promising so much hope and fulfilment, but delivering so little. A wilderness where people are consumed by the consumer lifestyle trying to shop their way to happiness and create the perfect Christmas paradise. A wilderness where people carry the burden and anxiety of the longing to be loved. A wilderness of pain from the cycle of selfish abuse and neglect at the hands of others who care only about themselves.

Humans devise many ways to attempt to deal with sin. We can justify it: "They deserved it!" We can rationalise it: "It was done in the name of love, and I was just trying to help." We can reframe it in more acceptable language - "It was a spirited conversation" even though it was really a volatile argument. We can simply attempt to cover it up. Or we even blame God and say it's the personality with which we were born.

The Advent message is the message of the hope we have in Christ—not hope as the world understands but an expectation that Christ will come again. Likewise, we also expect him to be with us now, here, through his word, because that is how he has promised to bring us his grace. Indeed, the One whom John pointed to, and called the people to prepare for, has arrived *and keeps on arriving in every service*. Here, in the church, is our refuge, for Christ *is* here. He will not drive us away but will turn us, with our sin, toward himself, to show us his mercy and favour.

This is what makes the church different from any other organisation in the world. Jesus doesn't deal with your sin the way the world would deal with sin. He doesn't bury your sin deeper by covering it up, but he lifts you up out of the pit. He doesn't reframe it but releases you from it. He doesn't justify it, but he justifies you. While some might say that right preparation for attending worship would be to leave our sins at the door before, we enter church the truth is it is best to bring them with you because here is found the Good News of the forgiveness of sins. Jesus bestows on each of us a peace that the world cannot give, because it is the peace given to us from our Heavenly Father