

THE TIMES THEY ARE A'CHANGING

Advent 2 2022 Matthew 3, 1-12

I have to admit that when I started preparing this sermon I suffered a serious attack of temptation. Whilst reading and thinking about the set lessons, I wondered if I had ever had anything relevant to say about them in the past. So I checked the list of my previous sermons – and lo and behold I had previously preached from this very spot on these lessons for the second Sunday in Advent. This was in 2007. I am sure nobody here will remember even remotely what I said then – so, I could just use it again. After all it is very important to recycle things.

Anyway I read through it to see what I had said, and it did not sound right – times have changed and, as a consequence, the context of our lives has changed. So much has happened between 2007 and now, that our whole perspective is different isn't it! Think of the word 'vaccine' and, between 2007 and now, how altered are all the emotional connotations the word generates!

Not that I would have reused the sermon, but if I had, it would have sounded stilted and oddly out of touch with present times. What was right and suitable in 2007 does not resonate now – the ethos of our lives had changed. This led me to thinking about today's gospel: what would those who came to listen have understood by what John was saying? What would have connected and resonated with John's hearers then, what would it have meant to them? What would they have understood him to be saying? And if he was speaking today what words would he have used and images would he have used to get his message across?

As a quick example, at the start of the lesson it quotes Isaiah saying '*Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.*' It doesn't mean much to us but those listening would have understood the allusion immediately.' At that time each village was responsible for that part of the Kings Highways that ran through their territory – it was their responsibility to ensure it was in good repair. And the results of it not being in good repair could be lethal when the king came through. So it was saying in a very serious way, clean up your act before God comes near.

If we move on to the next part of the reading: the NRSV version we heard says '*When [John] saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism he said to them 'you brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit that befits repentance and do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our Father' 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 bare good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.'*' The NRSV is basically a word-for-word direct rendition of Greek into English.

And here for comparison is how the passage is interpreted in 'The Message' a modern paraphrase that attempts to give in modern parlance the sense rather than the words of the text: '*When John realised a lot of Pharisees and Sadducees were showing up for a baptismal experience because it was the thing to do, he exploded. "Brood of snakes! What do you think you are doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snake skins is going to make any difference! It's your life that must change, not your skins. And don't think you can pull rank by claiming Abraham*

as father. Being a descendent of Abraham is neither here nor there. Descendants of Abraham are a dime a dozen. What counts is your life. Is it green and blossoming? Because if it is deadwood, it goes on the fire.'

The facts are the same but they feel quite different don't they? More lively, more immediate. Which do you relate to best? Which seems to speak to your life now the best?

So to move on with our reinterpretation. Who were the Pharisees and Sadducees and how does their situation relate to us today?

The Pharisees were a Jewish group that resisted the tendency of the time to adopt pagan Greek culture. They banded together into brotherhoods for the purpose of keeping the Jewish law and culture more strictly, and promoting their interpretation of the Old Testament. At the material level, they opposed any despotic rule, for example that of the High Priests or the Roman occupying power. While some were revolutionaries, most were pacifists.

The Sadducees on the other hand were conservatives in religion, rejecting the Pharisees development of the Law and also the doctrine of the resurrection. Many were wealthy landowners who lived in Jerusalem and worked with the Roman government. Most of the High Priests in the recent past had belonged to this group and they sincerely believed they were carefully following the teaching of Zadok, King Solomon's High Priest.

Both groups honestly believed they were following the true way and that they were safe because they lived in the faith of Abraham, that is, 'they had Abraham as their father', though of course they were not convinced that the other group was really following the true religion. Both groups honestly believed they were truly following what God wanted from them and everybody else was wrong.

It's not so different today is it? Different forms of history and churchmanship, of divergent personalities and life experience, divide the followers of Christ. Mine is the true way, everybody else is ignorant or confused. We can be so self-centred that we cannot see those parts of the truths of God that other people have found. We must turn away from an arrogance that says that we have the whole of God's truth and humbly listen to those we meet. Our theme must always be '*What is God telling you that I need to know*' – not – '*Let me tell you where you are wrong!*' And today as we praise God as Anglicans and Methodists together let us give thanks for those things we have in common as the children of God and those things we can learn from one another!

So what was John's response to the Pharisees and Sadducees, and how does it speak to us today?

John directly tackles both groups about their touching faith that with Abraham as their father they had special protection. They trusted in their descent to save them. They are not alone in assuming a false safety. I think we all, to some extent, delude ourselves in this way: 'God understands my situation and he is very forgiving.' 'I regularly go to church and this provides 'fire insurance' for me'. 'My shortcomings are quite minor compared to lots of others.' 'Church has been a cover for evil men and hypocrites; I

have no interest in it or their purported faith.’ ‘I go to the only true church, I am assured of the future.’ But John sneers at their presumption and clearly states what is required. ‘Bear fruit that befits repentance’. It is always a good idea to reflect on the nature of our religious security blankets! They may be worn out, have holes in them and need an upgrade!

So what did John mean by repentance? Both John and Jesus use the word without explanation. They did not need to, because, for their Jewish listeners, repentance was central to all true religious faith. To the rabbis, *the essence of repentance lay in such a thorough change of mind that it issued in a change of life and a change of conduct.* I will say that again as it central to what John is on about. To the rabbis, *the essence of true repentance lay in such a thorough change of mind that it issued in a change of life and a change of conduct.*

For the Jews then, true repentance issues from, not merely a sentimental sorrow or even regret for the past, but a real change in life from now on. Jews had a holy horror of seeking to trade on the mercy of God and held that true repentance brings forth fruits which demonstrates and confirms the reality of the repentance. Now Jesus uses the same word for repentance as John did, and his hearers would have understood it equally clearly. From the very beginning of his ministry Jesus proclaimed: ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near’. Repentance was not something pasted on, but an outworking of the deep heart changes that follow from true repentance and is supported, strengthened and directed by the Spirit of God working away in cooperation with us, day by day.

So what are these fruits that are the consequence of true repentance? In today’s epistle Paul says: ‘May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.’ In Galatians, Paul gives a fuller list of the kinds things that are the consequence of true repentance; namely love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. In these we can see the outworking, the consequence, of repentance – though probably they develop over time, as the fruits do not come by accident.

It has always been hard to recognise our shortcomings and then to change our hearts under the teaching of scripture directed by the Holy Spirit. Especially as over the past few years our lives have been disrupted by natural disasters, disease, injustice and other challenges and it has often been hard to attend to repentance and fruits. Through these years we have found that many of the things and beliefs we thought of as constants in our lives aren’t as constant as we thought. As we reflect on the effects of these events on our own lives and in the lives of those in the wider community, we see that tension, depression, fear for the future, are rife, especially in younger people who will face the consequences of our past decisions. However those that show the effects of the change of perspective and values that follow from true repentance gradually being expressed in their lives, will gradually find patience replacing tension, joy replacing depression, hope replacing fear. As those we live with see these dimensions of our lives, they may well say, like the lady in ‘Harry met Sally’, I want what she is having.

The primary message of John then remains as true today as it did in his day: 'What counts is your life. Is it green and blossoming? Because if it is deadwood, it goes on the fire.' Or in Isaiah's words: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'