



Advent Course Talks 2009

Written & Delivered by Peter Kane and Jon Robinson

Session 2 – Monday 7th December

Welcome

Prayer

Living God, as we reflect today upon the ministry and message of your servant John the Baptist, we give you thanks for those in our own day who stand up and speak out against evil and injustice; those who are ready, if necessary, to stand alone for their convictions, enduring mockery and rejection, sacrificing status and security, willing to risk everything for what they believe to be right. We thank you for their vision, their determination, their willingness to be a voice in the wilderness.

Living God, you call us to reach out to your broken world – to those walking in darkness, wrestling with despair, craving affection, thirsting to find purpose in their lives. Give us faith, wisdom, tenderness and love to meet that challenge. Help us to venture into the wilderness ourselves, and there, gently but confidently, to speak your word of life.

In the name of Christ. Amen.

Reading

Matthew 25, verses 1 to 13

Music - 'This is the Record of John' (Orlando Gibbons)

Talk

Imagine the scene – you are out walking, perhaps on the South Downs, and coming towards you is someone who is dressed in clothes made from thick, coarse animal hair, munching from a pot of locusts dipped in honey as he went.

Perhaps you would be surprised at his appearance, confused or maybe even a little scared of the wild sight before you. But what really surprises you is that you're drawn towards him. He is speaking words of truth, like you haven't heard for years. And what's more, you're not the only one being drawn into what he is saying – others are joining you and listening to his message.

At the time of John the Baptist, it was common for heralds or messengers to arrive in a town ahead of an important visiting Roman official. When they arrived, people listened as normally they had news of an important event, or message to prepare for what was to shortly come.

We hear from the passage that John was doing a similar thing – he was coming to prepare for the real event – the important person who was to come. But instead of running into a town, dressed the part and demanding attention, he chose to separate himself from the normal events and customs and live in the desert. He did not do this to be difficult or different for the sake of being different, he did it because he wanted to be separate from the hypocrisy of the religious leaders, to listen to God without the distractions of city life, to fulfil the prophecy seen in Isaiah and to capture the attention of those in the area.

So the people came to this man in the desert, dressed differently and speaking in such an engaging way. They came to him from all over the land, and when they did, they did more than just listen to his message and leave. They were baptised – in the river – then and there! His message was of such truth and importance; people were immediately able to make a decision – a decision to repent of all that they had done wrong and make a public gesture to show that they had changed to live for God.



John was preaching a message of true repentance, symbolised by the baptism in the river – a far cry from the baptism practiced in the Jewish temples to initiate new converts.

John's baptisms had a new and radical meaning – they were to prepare people to accept God's Son. When John challenged the people to confess sin individually, he signalled the start of a new way to relate to God. He was showing the people that they as individuals and as a nation had to repent and prepare for the Lord who was coming.

We have all encountered the message from John the Baptist. We didn't meet him up on the South Downs, nor did we see him in the desert, but his words are as full of meaning now as they always have been. Change is needed in your life before you can hear and understand the fullness of Jesus' message. We have to admit that before we can be forgiven for something, we have to admit we did wrong, or sinned in the first place!

As committed Christians, we are those who seek to live in accordance with God's way and not the way of the world. Repentance for us should be a way of life. As people who know and love God as our Lord and saviour, we have to realise that we are constantly failing to live fully in accordance with his will. We are people who should be all too aware of our sinfulness and so we should be people for whom saying sorry to God is something quite natural to do - each day confessing our sins and failures, and seeking to be on God's path, not diverting from His holy route.

Sadly, it is not just us as individuals that need to repent, or us as a group, but the whole country needs to hear and act on John's message. Two thousand years ago, John was calling on the whole nation to repent - to confess their sin and return to the Lord. And his message holds true for our nation today. There is a marked decline in morality in our country - we are moving further and further away from God's way. The nation needs to turn back to the Lord.

Once we know and understand John's message of true and prayerful repentance, we need to act. We are also called to be messengers like John, preparing the way for the Lord's return in glory, by calling people to repentance - to turn back to the Lord. In our everyday lives – in the different situations and contexts in which we find ourselves - we are called to be that prophetic voice crying out in the midst of our contemporary society – pointing people to the Lord Jesus Christ in whom true salvation is found.

Discussion Time

- What does 'repentance' mean for you personally?
- What do you understand to be the significance of Baptism?
- John declared (v8), "I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." What does it mean to be baptized with the Holy Spirit?
- What does it mean for us to be a 'prophetic voice' in the world today?
- How effective are we at making use of the opportunities we have in our daily lives to point people to the Lord Jesus?
- How can we prepare the way for the Lord's coming?

Music - 'Lost in Wonder'

Closing Prayer and the Grace

O Lord Jesus Christ,
who at your first coming sent your messenger
to prepare your way before you:
grant that, in readiness for your second coming to judge the world, we likewise may so prepare your way
by turning the hearts of the disobedient to you;
for you are alive and reign with the Father

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in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

St. Paul's Church
Churchside, Chichester
West Sussex, PO19 6FT

(01243) 533403
www.stpaulschichester.org