



Advent Course Talks 2009

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Session 2 – Thursday 10th 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

It's often all too easy to judge people by appearances. It's so easy for us to form an opinion about a person simply on the basis of what we see on the surface - what they wear, what kind of car they drive, how posh they speak, and so on. But from time to time, there are certain individuals who come along who might not seem particularly appealing on the surface, but who have nevertheless attracted a great deal of interest and have been highly respected the world over. One such person is the late Mother Theresa - a small, seemingly insignificant figure whose humility and love for the poor of Calcutta attracted the attention of the great and the good, including some rather unlikely admirers, like Malcolm Muggeridge. There was clearly something about her, something very profound about her personality and about who she was - an inner beauty - that attracted the interest of so many people.

And so it was with John the Baptist or 'baptiser'. On the surface, he was leading a pretty unusual lifestyle - clothed with camel's hair, wearing a leather belt around his waist and eating locusts and wild honey. Yet somehow people felt drawn to him - not just a few folk, but as Mark records, people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem. John was indeed a great crowd-puller. And Mark clearly portrays John's ministry as being of great significance in relation to the ministry of Christ himself. Notice that here at the start of the Gospel, we have just one verse (v1) actually referring to Christ, before Mark immediately goes on to talk about John. For his role was to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus, the Son of God, and he was to do so, most importantly, by preaching repentance - calling people to turn back to God. And his aim was not simply to encourage just a few individuals to do so, but rather John's call was for national repentance. The way of the Lord could only be prepared if the whole nation was ready, and it seems that John was certainly successful in accomplishing his mission as people were coming out to him en masse from all around Judea in order to repent of their sins. And accompanying John's proclamation of repentance was the act of baptism - an outward sign of an inner change.

And I believe that John's proclamation of repentance is of great significance for us as Christian believers in the 21st century. According to Scripture, repentance is about returning, turning back, to God - it implies not



just a change in one's mental attitude, but a total commitment to serving the Lord, relying solely on his strength, doing his will and living as his people. When the prophets of the Old Testament period constantly called for repentance, this is what they meant, and this too is what John meant when he called for people to repent. Repentance is both about saying sorry to God for our wrongdoing and about recommitting our lives totally to God. Unfortunately, in our present-day culture here in Britain, we're not very good at saying sorry when we do things wrong. We're often fearful of the consequences of admitting that we are wrong or it might be that we regard the concept of saying sorry as a sign of weakness. And how often do we see figures in public life, politicians especially, saying sorry for things they have done wrong? Probably very little, if at all. Admitting one's wrongdoing is often seen as a 'vote loser'.

But by contrast, committed Christians 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 those who acknowledge the sovereignty of God in our lives, we cannot but 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 re-dedicate our lives to him afresh.

And there is an urgent need, too, for national repentance in our country. 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, as well. There's a marked decline in morality in our country - we are moving further and further away from God's way. And so the nation needs to turn back to the Lord. So like John, we are called to be messengers, 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 to be 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
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.