

Sermon for Advent 2 – 4th December 2016

Given by Sarah Shaw

Isaiah 11. 1-10

Psalms 72. 1-7, 18-19

Romans 15. 4-13

Matthew 3. 1-12

I wonder if you can think of any other character, in the New Testament, other than John the Baptist, whose clothing is described....? There's a test for you! I struggled too! I'm sure there are one or two, but generally the Gospel writers don't describe what people were wearing. Perhaps because they expected their readers to know. But John the Baptist is a notable exception. And we're so used to hearing the Gospel reading we had today on the second Sunday of Advent, that his outfit might make little impact on us.

So let's take a moment to picture John the Baptist. A man of the desert – a holy man – wearing clothing of camel's hair, and a leather belt around his waist. He would certainly stand out here in Colinton. And he would have stood out, too, in the Judean wasteland where he exercised his ministry! He stood out so much, and his ministry became so widespread and well-known, that Josephus, a historian of the time, wrote about him.

John the Baptist appeared in a critical moment in Israel's history. For 400 years that nation had been without a prophetic voice – and of course at this time was under Roman occupation. Then appears this holy man, dressed just as Elijah had been.

Unlike many would be messiahs who were appearing at the time of John the Baptist's and Jesus' ministry – this man preached something entirely radical. Repentance, and the forgiveness of sins through baptism. At this time, you see, there were only two types of baptism or ceremonial washing. There was the baptism with water that Gentiles wishing to convert went through, and there was the repeated ceremonial washing for Jews. John the Baptist was calling for all *Jewish* people –not in need of baptism according to the rules - to repent and be baptised. A once and for all baptism symbolising turning back to God and the forgiveness of sins. And many,

many flocked to him in this spirit of repentance. We're told that 'The people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him.'

The word used by John the Baptist – metanoeo - isn't about just saying sorry but is about turning. Turning back to God and changing one's life completely. It is radical. So when John the Baptist sees the Pharisees and the Sadducees, who prided themselves on keeping the rules and making sure others did too, he meets them with those harsh words 'You brood of vipers!' Not perhaps the best tactic for an evangelist, perhaps, but we can only presume he has a history with them! He criticises them for believing themselves to be righteous because they were descendants of Abraham. This came from a widespread teaching that Abraham's faithfulness could in some way 'cover' the failings of his descendants.

But John the Baptist says 'No!' Repentance is for everyone, and why? Because the long-awaited Kingdom of heaven is near, and claims to be Abraham's children are not enough. The Kingdom of heaven is near, and we hear what it's like in Isaiah – where justice and righteousness and peace shall reign – symbolised in these words 'The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.' This is the picture we're given of the Kingdom of heaven. One of peace not war, where enemies are reconciled, and where the most vulnerable lead the strong.

So John proclaims that the Kingdom of heaven is near. But actually it's more than that. The word he uses is closer to 'Is here' than is 'is near.' And the Kingdom of heaven is not only about righteousness and justice and peace in the world, in a cosmic sense, but about God's rightful sovereignty in our lives. And not only in our lives as individuals, but in our families, and in this church family of whom we are part.

What is the mark of God's rightful sovereignty in our lives? If it is about making peace with others, being reconciled to our enemies, being prepared to be vulnerable, there is no better time than today to turn back to God today and ask how you can respond to this call. And be prepared to be changed, because repentance produces a changed life.

As I said, the Kingdom of heaven that John the Baptist reminds us is at hand, is about God's rightful sovereignty not just in our individual lives but in our life as a church family. And it is not enough to say that we are all Christians here, just as the Pharisees and Sadducees claimed their righteousness because of Abraham. As we heard in our Gospel, it is by our *fruit* we will be known. Peace. Being reconciled to each other. Being vulnerable to each other. These need to be the characteristics and hallmarks of our church family if we are to move forward together in love. In the reading we heard from Romans, Paul prays for the community of Christians there – that they would 'Live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together they may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.' This is what this church family is ultimately for. Particularly in this interregnum, let's pray for our relationships to be transformed so that the hallmark of this church family is love.

We don't have to try to do this on our own of course – that would be impossible. The key to all of this, is, of course, Jesus. Both John the Baptist and Paul continually point to Jesus. Only in the power of Jesus can we be enabled, strengthened and resourced to love him, and each other, in the way we should.