

Preparing the Way for the Coming Christ

The Main Man of Advent

It would be fair to say I think that the main man of Advent these days is Santa. As we count down the weeks and days to Christmas, we see Santa in our shopping centres, and adorning our houses, that cheery, bearded fellow.

In the Christian tradition, however, the main man of Advent has been John the Baptist. As we think of preparing our hearts for the coming of Christ, who better to listen to than John, the man who stood at the turn of the ages and, as the prophet Isaiah said, prepared the way for the Lord.

And when you think about it, there could not be two more different figures could there!

You can find Santa in an air-conditioned shopping centre, in his perfectly manicured workshop, attended to by his little elves. *John was found alone by a river in the wilderness, eating his locusts and honey.*

Santa wears a bright and beautiful big red suit. *John wears a rough and ready camel vest.*

You sit on Santa's lap and he asks you what you want for Christmas. *John stares you down and tells you that you need to repent.*

Santa might smile and say, "I'm sure you've been a good boy this year haven't you?" *But as we heard in Matthew 3, John addressed some in the crowd as a brood of vipers.*

Santa is quite a loveable figure in all his cheery inoffensiveness. But John, it's much harder to know where to place him. He's very much a man out of sync with our times, with any time really. To hear John rightly will make us uncomfortable and uneasy.

Which is precisely why we must allow ourselves to hear John's prophetic voice, that through him God would break through our very comfortably sentimental Christmas cheer, so that we might come to terms with the true depth of what Christ's coming into the world really means.

So this morning we are going to journey out to meet John as he appeared at the Jordan river. And we will listen to him, and watch as Jesus appears on the scene too. And as we do, we are going to learn about ourselves, learn about Jesus, and then consider what Matthew 3 teaches us about Christmas.

1. What do we learn about ourselves?

Did you see the message that John proclaims in verse 2: "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near."

To prepare them to meet the Lord, John declares to the crowd the reality of their sinfulness. He declares the same to us. We are sinful. We need to repent, turning away from our sin and turning back to God.

That's what the people at John's baptism are doing, really. All these people flocking to the Jordan river, they are just getting honest about the reality of their own failure to live the righteous life God commands. So we read in verse 5:

*People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of Jordan. **Confessing their sins**, they were baptised by him in the Jordan River.*

Have you ever felt that feeling of just wanting to give yourself a deep clean on the inside? I know I certainly have. You know when you say something, or do something or think something, and you just want to wash it all away. One of the enduring images of the Bible about our sin is that it makes us unclean. Our sin makes us filthy, and so what we need is a hot, spiritual bath.

That's what these crowds at the Jordan River recognise that they need. And that's what they come to receive in baptism. "I'm filthy" the crowds say, "I need a wash." They are getting honest about the reality of their sinfulness.

Of course, not *everyone* who has come the river is engaging in such honest reflection of their own moral failure. Many Pharisees and Sadducees we are told in verse 7, have come to check this whole thing out. But they themselves seem to have checked out of the baptism itself. Perhaps they have come to see if John's ministry is legitimate, maybe they are there to look down upon the plebs who have come to be washed clean. Whatever the case, they have passed up the opportunity to turn the mirror of John's Word towards themselves.

As John tells them, they too need to reckon with their sin. They, too, need to repent. They, too, are required to bear the fruit that accompanies true repentance. And the result if they do not? The righteous and swift judgement of God.

It's a constant temptation for us to look at the people *out there* as the filthy and the failures. But John's preaching reminds us that, "*we cannot presume to say to ourselves that we have better genes, or better morals, or better theology, or better attitudes, or better humility, or better repentance.*"¹ None of us can pick ourselves up by the bootstraps and earn our way into God's family. *It is God* who is in the business of making children of Abraham, even out of stones.

¹ Fleming Rutledge, "The Axe at the Root of the Trees", in *Advent*, p. 297

According to John, the right preparation for Christmas is to be honest about the reality of our sin, and to humbly repent of our failure to live God's way. To hold up the mirror of God's law to our own lives and realise we need to be washed clean.

For it is this act of confession and repentance that opens the door for the gospel. One writer puts it this way,

*The important thing to see (in this chapter) is that the remedy for sin is not **denying** sin's presence, or explaining it away, **but openly admitting it**. We are free from sin only when we face it; we disown sin by owning up to it; sin is remitted where sin is admitted. Thus, (John's preaching of) the law turns out to be the threshold of the gospel.²*

² F.D. Bruner on Matthew, p. 89

2. What do we learn about Jesus?

And so it is that the gospel arrives on the scene as Jesus appears at this sinners convention in the wilderness. As is entirely fitting with his humble arrival into the world in the stable, it's at this gathering of filthy failures that Jesus makes his first public appearance and begins his public ministry. And as Jesus introduces himself onto the scene in this chapter, there are two verdicts delivered of him that reveal something about who he is.

The first verdict comes from John.

Now before I said that the spotlight falls on John in the time of Advent. But of course that's not quite right is it? For John himself says in verse 11 that he is the forerunner to one who is *greater than him*. In Fact all of all of his ministry points *away from himself*. John *himself* is the spotlight, drawing all of our attention onto Jesus, the one who John says will bring about the forgiveness of sins.

And so, when Jesus arrives at the Jordan River asking to be baptised, did you hear John's reply? You can see it there in verse 14:

John tried to deter him, saying "I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?"

Do you see what John is saying? Jesus is the only person who doesn't need the baptism John is offering. John recognises Jesus to be the sinless saviour for whom he has been preparing the way. For John to baptise Jesus would be completely the wrong way round! John's verdict is that Jesus is *greater than him*, John's verdict is that Jesus is *without sin*.

But that is not the most amazing thing we learn about Jesus. For the second verdict we hear comes from above. There are three cosmic signs, like a heavenly spotlight, that further illuminate who Jesus is. Listen again to verse 16, as Jesus is met with an open heaven, the descending Spirit, and the voice of his Father:

As soon as Jesus was baptised, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

"This is my son whom I love, with him I am well pleased." This is the verdict of God the Father: Jesus is his beloved son. Here we have a picture into the eternal life of God, as the whole of the Trinity is present in this moment. The Father's voice is heard, the Spirit is seen in the dove, the Son standing in the water, all united in love. As John has recognised, Jesus is sinless and perfect, thus the voice from heaven can declare that he is *well pleased* with his Son. But he is more than that, for here we learn that Jesus is *divine*.

The prophet Isaiah said that God's messenger would declare, "Here is your God!" And now God himself says as much.

*"Here," God is saying in as many words, "in this man, is everything I want to say, reveal, and do, and everything I want people to hear, see, and believe. If you want to know anything about me, if you want to hear anything from me, if you want to please me, get together with him."*³

Jesus is the Sovereign Lord who has come with power.

³ Bruner, Matthew, p. 112

3. What do we learn about Christmas?

And these two verdicts, from John and from God, make the events of this chapter all the more remarkable.

As Jesus, the sinless Son of God, comes from Galilee to the Jordan River, to a crowd of confessing sinners, what do you expect him to do? We read in verse 13, Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan...how would you expect that verse to finish?

He came to the Jordan...to judge all the filthy sinners! It could have said that! John the Baptist has just said that the one coming after him is the judge of all the earth, who will rid the world of evil, separating the wheat from the chaff. And here are all these people with their hands in the air saying that they are guilty. Jesus could have come to judge them, but he doesn't.

He came to the Jordan...to give everyone a wash, to take over from John and do the baptisms himself! That would have been nice wouldn't it? It could have said that. But it doesn't.

This is what verse 13 actually says:

*Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to **be baptised** by John.*

That ought to amaze us! Jesus is the only one there who doesn't *need* the spiritual bath that John offers, and yet here he is joining the queue at the failure's convention. No wonder John tries to deter him, "Jesus, this isn't for you, you're the perfect sinless Son of God."

But Jesus says that he must do it. He says it has to be done this way to "fulfil all righteousness." It's a strange response. But I think Jesus is saying that he must be baptised in this way, because this is exactly what he has come to do. For in the events of this chapter, we learn something about the very nature of the gospel, and why the events of the first Christmas are such astounding good news.

For what we see in Jesus' baptism could quite easily serve to be a summary of his mission. *Jesus, the perfect son of God, joins us in our filth, so that we can join him in his family.* That's what Jesus does isn't it. He becomes one of us, taking on our full humanity, facing all of the struggles of human existence – and yet he does it in order to overcome them for us, so that we can be fully forgiven and welcomed into fellowship with God. *Jesus joins us in our failure, and in our filth, so that we can be a part of his family.*

Of course, Christmas gives us such a vivid reminder us of this every year. Jesus was literally born into the world in filth and squalor. It's so easy for Christmas to become sentimental and sanitised. But Jesus did not come into an airbrushed world, but he came into the world as it really is, messy, and dirty, and scarred by the effects of human sin. He really came to be *one of us*, so that we might in the end be *one with him*.

“As Athanasius, the fourth-century theologian, proclaimed: Christ became what we are, that we might become what he is. This is ‘the marvelous exchange.’ He enters our life that we might enter his. Behold God the Son, who has become our Brother (in order to bring us home to our Father.)”⁴

For ultimately, the trajectory that began in Jesus’ birth, and continues in his baptism, as he stoops down to join us in the middle of our failure, leads him down and down all the way to the cross. For it’s on the cross that Jesus not only joins us in the midst of our sin, but he takes it all upon himself. And yet, sin does not crush him, and death does not defeat him, but he emerges victorious from the grave, a victory that he shares with all those who trust in him.

In this chapter we are faced with the reality of our own sinfulness, and the identity of Jesus as the sinless Son of God. But, wonderfully, Jesus did not come into the world to condemn us, but to save us. As we read in Isaiah 40, the sovereign Lord exercises his mighty power with the tender care of a shepherd for his sheep.

And so those cosmic signs that marked out Jesus, can also be true of us, if only we would put our trust in *him to be our rescuer*. United with him, the heavens are opened to us and we are welcomed into the presence of God, the Spirit is given to us and we are filled with his Power, and we too can hear the voice of the Father, as He declares us to be his beloved children.

⁴ Glen Scrivener, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/glory-to-god-lowest/>

When we put our trust in Jesus, his Father becomes our Father, his Spirit becomes our Spirit, and his future becomes our future. This is what Jesus came to do. This is the good news of the gospel. This is what Christmas is all about.

So are you ready for Christmas? Being ready for Christmas does not mean having your tree set up, having all the presents and food sorted, or getting the perfect family Santa photo. John the Baptist tells us that being ready for the Coming of Christ is to have a humble and repentant heart, putting our hand up in an honest confession of our sin. For it's then that we can look to Jesus, the one greater than John, who does not come to condemn us, but to save us, jumping into all the filth and failure of humanity, in order to rescue us, wash us clean, and bring us into his family.

Santa in the shopping mall is all about giving us what we want. But in the gospel we are given what we desperately need. In Christ we can receive something so much deeper. We can receive the very things that lies beneath and behind our every unsatisfied longing and desire. An open heaven, the descending Spirit, and the affirmation of our Father in heaven. For all those who trust in Jesus, all who are united with him by faith, are a part of his family. And so this Christmas, brothers and sisters, the words the Father spoke to Jesus his Son, are addressed to you too:

*"You, are my beloved son.
You are my beloved daughter,
with you I am well pleased."*