

WESLEY UNITING CHURCH, CANBERRA

SUNDAY, 9th DECEMBER, 2007, 10.30 am.

SERMON

James Haire

READINGS:

Isaiah 11: 1 – 10

Psalm 72: 1 – 7, 18 – 19

Romans 15: 4 – 13

Matthew 3: 1 – 12

TEXT:

Matthew 3: 11:

The words of John the Baptist: “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire”.

On Monday the 3rd of December 2007, a new Federal Government under Kevin Rudd was sworn-in by the Governor General. About half of those sworn-in chose to do so on the Bible, which is one measure of the way in which a Christian may profess their Christian faith. Our new Prime Minister is a person who is of deep Christian faith, who also thinks long and hard about the implications of his faith for public life and policy. It is true, of course, that the previous Federal Government also had among its ranks devout Christians. However, it is significant that we are at the beginning of a new government where there is an explicit determination to relate Christian faith to our life together as a community. This is seen in the way in which Kevin Rudd reflected upon the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his article last year in *The Monthly*.

So Christianity and public life have come together in a new way at this time. For Christians, there is a danger in this. We have to remember the excesses of the result of the Constantinian Settlement in the Roman Empire in the fourth century. After years of persecution, it eventually caused in the church a Christian triumphalism and arrogance totally unworthy of its Lord. So it is not always a blessing for the church, born as it was a persecuted minority of a persecuted minority, (that is, Christianity within Judaism, within the Roman Empire) to find itself with the seduction of power.

We have the account of John the Baptist, which in one form or another, appears in all four gospels. Matthew’s account is the most complete of the four gospels. But it serves a more important evangelical purpose. It sets a major theme for the whole book, that John the Baptist is the last and the closest prophet to witness to Christ.

Many first century Jews believed that Elijah would announce the coming of the Messiah and of the Messianic Age (Malachi 3: 1; 4: 5-6). The Dead Sea Scrolls Community at Qumran had a particular interest in these events. John represents the

culmination of the Old Testament prophets. He harks back to Israel's origins in the desert, where the purity of faith comes. The harshness of the desert stands in stark contrast to the luxury of Herod's house, which in the view of the Qumran community did not represent the true faith of Israel. John calls them to a general baptism of repentance. That is, a preparation for a return to their original faith before God's great mighty act of sending his Son into the world. He then contrasts himself with Jesus as our text shows. He is to organise a general baptism of preparation. Christ will bring a total change to history. That is what baptising with the Holy Spirit and fire means. A new age will dawn, which will be the beginning of the end of history. This reflects what is later to happen on the day of Pentecost, which is taken from the Septuagint version of Joel 2: 28-32. But this coming of the Spirit and of fire is all part of the one Christ for John the Baptist. Therefore, the primary thing that we celebrate at Christmas is God's decisive act in history, and the beginning of the end of history.

John is witness to Jesus. He points forward to him. It seems that in the early church there was some tension between the followers of John and the followers of Jesus. This tension can be seen in church history to this day, with the Mandaeans (also known as the Nasoreans or the Christians of St John) who are purported by some of their number to have links going right back to St John. They are still found to this day south of Bagdad in Iraq. (cf Acts 19: 2-3). Here, against this background, Matthew makes it clear what the position of John the Baptist is.

However, all of this tension, between the followers of John and the followers of Jesus, is not just a historical curiosity. What is important here is that John is **witness** to what is about to happen. The difference between the followers of John and the followers of Jesus is their attitude to Jesus. For Christians, Jesus is the Son of God. For the Mandaeans, Jesus is simply a messenger of the special knowledge (gnosis). For Christians, John is the true link between the Old Testament to the New Testament. He sees the NT as the fulfilment of the OT. What is central here is that John is **witness** to God's act in Christ and that act is decisive.

There are three consequences of this.

First, this coming of Jesus is not just the entry of a new set of ideas into this world, which is the Gnostic approach associated with the followers of John. It is not as if he is presenting us with a few new ideas which we may accept or reject on the basis of their reason. Nor is this Jesus one of many lords or teachers to whom humanity may or may not turn. Karl Barth puts it in his Dogmatics "[Jesus Christ] is not one of many lords to whom humanity may subject himself to-day, and to-morrow turn his back on them and defy them, playing with them like a ball or puppet, as though they were the creations of his own caprice and phantasy." KD 4/1 401.

The second thing that John points out is that there is a difference in type between him and Jesus. This is something that is central to the incarnation. In recent years, there has been much sociological analysis of Jesus and his world, as to how Jesus fits into the religious sociology of first century Judaism. This is valuable background. However, ultimately what John is saying here is that we cannot relativise Jesus in his historical background as if that totally explains and defines him. He is other, he is quite different, he is God incarnate.

Third, the church is called to be witness. In his study constantly before him, Karl Barth had The Crucifixion from the Isenheim altar, Colmar, by Matthias Grünewald. In this painting, John the Baptist holding the Old Testament in his left hand points constantly to Christ. The church finds this very difficult, because it likes always to point to itself, because it is rather insecure about itself and its position in society. So John's words are important to us today. At this point we have two things in our immediate history. On the one hand, we live in a heavily secularised society. On the other hand, we have the hopes and aspirations of a new government. In all of this, we must point to Christ, not to ourselves.

Despite the opportunities of a government sympathetic to Christianity, we still live in a very secular Australia in which it is counter-cultural to declare one's Christian faith. While the ordinary punter might assume that Christianity is for the mad, the bad or the sad, we believe that it is a faith of real liberation through identification with Christ.

So how are we to exist? It seems to me that we need to live with the humility of the disciples of Christ. We need to follow Christ's example. Christians are simply the ones who joyfully bear the mark of the Christ upon themselves. We need to demonstrate how the Christian understanding and experience, through all the ups and downs of Christian history, has provided the most useful insights as to how society should live. We should make this our contribution to the community. We should not seek to dominate, or to give a special place to Christians, or to the church. We should simply and humbly suggest that our experience of life is the most helpful for the happiness of all our fellow citizens and our community. We need to be clear in our thinking, and fearless in our witness to the gospel and the implications of the gospel for life in Australia and our responsibilities overseas. We should be loving, caring and gentle to those around us. We should see ourselves as genuine citizens of the world, fully participating in the pain of global society. We should care about the good of our environment as God's creation, and especially as its degradation primarily affects the poor. We are both citizens of this world and of heaven. The coming of the Kingdom of God guides the way in which we see the planet.

However, we must never say these things arrogantly but humbly and in the service of the world. To speak arrogantly or self-righteously is to point to ourselves, and our own view of ourselves as superior, and not to God. And if we point to ourselves and not to God, we are idolators. Self-righteousness can be the beginning of idolatry, whether that is personal self-righteousness or social self-righteousness (which is a travesty of social justice).

In essence, we witness with humility and determination to the truth as it has been revealed to us, for the good of all. Quite simply, our lives should reflect the hope that Christ has implanted in us, for the good of the whole community. In that spirit, we give Kevin Rudd's government our love, our constructive critique and our richest blessing.