

Introduction

Advent has traditionally been a season of preparation. The church over the centuries has come to understand that Christians need to set aside regular times of the year to consider again the full significance of what God has done in Jesus Christ. The meaning and joy of Christmas will easily elude us unless we make a focussed effort to dwell ahead of time on all the promises of God that have come to fulfilment in Jesus' birth.

The church's traditional Advent practice stands in tension with contemporary culture. The rhythms of our secular, consumer society have displaced the church year. In our society, preparations for Christmas have been reduced to hanging twinkling Christmas lights, listening to well worn commercialised carols and gazing upon an abundance of material goods there for the buying. In an add for one of the major retail chains they are even using the Christian words of hope, joy and love to evoke positive feelings for your shopping pleasures this Christmas. Somehow the commercial world has hijacked the season and no longer do we look at the promises of God but rather our own longings for possessions which have become the focus of this time of the year.

Reflection on John the Baptist

How different is the preparation to which John the Baptist calls the people of Israel! The promises of God that are coming to fulfilment in Christ should compel people to confess their sins. John asks us to examine ourselves, rather than bask in holiday wonder. We should bear good fruit with our lives, rather than worry about the material things that we are wanting to get or give. John is almost a comical figure, dressed in camel's hair and eating locusts and wild honey, but his message is hard-hitting: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Repentance is a confusing concept to many Christians or would be followers of Christ today. Does it simply mean feeling sorry for our mistakes? Is it a matter of trying to be a better person? For some, the language of repentance dredges up feelings of guilt and unworthiness and even the fear of the day of judgement when God will separate the good from the bad or as Scripture puts it 'the wheat from the chaff'.

A question raised is: 'Can I ever be good enough to be sure that I will experience God's mercy rather than God's wrath?' This is sad because this is not what is being taught here or elsewhere.

What John – and Advent – remind us is that repentance is not primarily about our standards of moral worthiness, but rather about God’s desire to realign us to accord with Christ’s life. Repentance is not so much about our guilt feelings as about God’s power to transform us into Christ’s image. For Matthew, John’s strange clothes and harsh sayings are necessary aspects of communicating the full meaning of the Gospel. While warm and fuzzy feelings at Christmas-time are not wrong, they fail to capture the full picture of what God has done for us in becoming human flesh.

Images in Matthew 3:1-12

Matthew uses several key images in this passage to under-score his theological perspective.

1. One image is that of ‘wilderness’.

John preaches in the wilderness and is a voice crying out in the wilderness. Wilderness evokes memories of the joyous, yet troubled history of Israel. God led the people of Israel out of bondage in Egypt into the wilderness, yet the people feared that God had brought them there to die. They sinned and rebelled against God in the wilderness, yet they also learned to trust and obey God there. It was not an easy time, but for many it was a time of transformation in their personal and faith life. In a sense many of us can relate to that. Through hard times, God has re-made us, remodelled our lives and so we come with grateful hearts in our worship. The repentance that befits the church’s observance of Advent has its roots way back in the wilderness experience of God’s people so long ago. We need to remember and affirm that Christ has brought us out of the bondage of sin and re-orientated our lives. Our wanderings in the Christian life will not be without our personal wilderness experiences where we have felt bereft of God, as if we have been deserted in our time of need. Yet God is a faithful God, who promises to keep pointing the way ahead if only we will take time, reflect and allow God’s Holy Spirit to give us direction in life itself.

2. A second key image for Matthew is ‘baptism’.

John baptizes people in the Jordan as they confess their sins. This baptism, says John, points forward to a more radical baptism in Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit. This new baptism will be much more than a symbol of our own efforts to live according to God’s will, for it will represent God’s act of fully claiming us for new life in Christ. Advent has similar meanings. We repent as we remember and affirm the new identity given us in baptism. We have been buried and raised with Christ and have been adopted into the family of God through baptism.

3. The other key images are ones that we don't like to talk about so much today – images of 'God's judgement' and 'God's wrath'.

John certainly didn't think much of the religious leaders of his day.

He says: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath."

I wonder what he'd say today – have things changed? Certainly in some things it hasn't changed. Religious leaders are human and have their failings – we know that through the press and unfortunately sometimes with our own experiences with our clergy.

John uses the analogy of the axe about to fall on the trees that bear no fruit for God. Matthew wants to make it clear that the kingdom of God brings with it fundamental change, a total break with the past. We can't live on and in the past using ancestors as our assurance that we are part of God's people. Rather, John points to the old passing away and the new has come in Christ.

Implicit in this is a warning for ourselves – we are called to re-new our faith – make it personal here and now in this season of Advent.

In a sense we can't live on the past glories that were the church in the 1950's & 1960's in Australia. Our faith needs to be current and contextual for our society today – no easy task!

Conclusion

The preparation to which John the Baptist calls Israel, like the preparation to which Advent calls the church, happens not primarily as self-purification but rather by way of radical trust that Christ himself is working to purify us and the world around us to become a dwelling place fit for himself.

The church's rediscovery of Advent will come in small steps as it recovers the ancient practices of fasting, waiting upon God, praying regularly and reading God's prophecies and seeing them come true.

These Advent disciplines prepare us for Christmas joy and feasting when they finally arrive. The commercialization of this season of preparation has totally overtaken the Christian concept of Advent and we are called to use this time to prepare for the coming event of the Christ-child. Advent rehearses us in the way that life should flow out of Christmas, a life marked by a steady confidence that God's kingdom is at hand and we celebrate that.

Praise be to God. Amen.