

The Messenger

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 3:1-6

If it were John the Baptist, preaching on this second Sunday in Advent, what would you expect to hear from him?

John the Baptist is one of those uncomfortable figures in the Bible. Son of Zechariah, a priest of the Jerusalem Temple, and Elizabeth, the cousin of Mary, we might assume John came from a fairly privileged background. As well as apartments in Jerusalem itself, the little village of Ein Karim, south of the city, is the place where Mary went one summer. It is tantalising to wonder if John, rebelling against the formality and traditionalism of the Temple, struck out north on his own, to the desert country around the river Jordan, to begin his unsettling ministry there.

And it was unsettling. Prophets always are. They have a way of speaking a truth that most people understand but don't want to hear. They have a way of speaking truth to power. They have a way of not being the full answer to a situation, but undoubtedly pointing to an answer to difficult situations.

John refuses to be dressed up any other way. You can't tame this wild man, or what he has to say. Set in history, amongst real people who are Emperors and Kings and high priests, God's Word comes to John in the wilderness. A hard word.

Repent.

It means to stop and turn around. It means to change directions; it means to change your mind and reorient yourself.

John's call is to all people to turn to God and from sin, to seek God's forgiveness, and to prepare the way for the Lord Who is coming. It means to be open to a new vision, and a new way of looking at things and doing things.

For the Church, for the nation, for the world, and for each one of us as individuals, it's not a word you'll find in many Christmas cards, but it is a word that we desperately need to hear today, and to do something about today.

Events of recent days have left the nation fearful and anxious. When difficult decisions need to be made, when there are quite obviously going to be winners and losers, and when intransigent positions are being taken up by just about everyone, it's hard to feel settled or joyful. And I'm not talking about voting patterns on Strictly, in case anyone was wondering. What does the word 'Repent' have to say into Brexit and the vote that is to take place in a few days time? What does the word 'Repent' have to say to our politicians, women and men, the vast majority decent people trying to do their best, but both in Westminster and Holyrood, whipped up by the media, grandstanding when the future of our country, and the future of generations to come, hangs in the balance. When the nation is so closely divided, and there is more than one possible answer to how to find a way ahead, I think the word Repent has a lot to say. And I don't use it as a finger-pointing judgement; I use it in that deep, inward, soul-searching way. Stop, turn-around, change direction, reorient yourself. And if I may be so bold, turn away from sin, and towards God.

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What about the Church, our Church, and the people who go to make it up. It has been interesting to return from a period of many months away, and coming back to see what has been happening. There is so much that is good and wonderful for which we should be deeply thankful. But we face a time, now that the dust has literally settled, when we need to take a long hard look at ourselves as a congregation. What is our vision for 2019 and beyond? What are we, members, elders, minister, staff, volunteers, seeking to achieve in God's Name in this community, and how are we planning to do this? The Kirk Session faces a difficult meeting on Tuesday and I take some information from a paper from the Stewardship and Finance Committee. When fewer people are taking on more responsibilities to keep things going by way of volunteering; when only just over half of our membership make a financial contribution to the work of the Church, and of that half on 75 give £10 or more a week, when 97% of our giving is static, when only 6 people out of 246 increased their giving, and when some of our highest

donors are on lower or fixed incomes, we need to wrestle with that word 'Repent', as a congregation. Our vision is confused and our message is mixed. We can contribute magnificently to the Clothing Drive, and other one-off events, but when it comes to being serious about the ongoing support of the Church, financially and with our time, many of us need to sit uncomfortably with the word 'Repent'. I also know that many who need to struggle most with that word are probably not here today, but still want the Church to be here for them when they need it. We are far from being the only Church to face this situation, but we are facing it here and now.

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What about the world, our world today? Sir David Attenborough spoke pointedly and poignantly about the impact of global warming and the threat to creation. Rivers and seas drown under an ocean of plastic. The Brazilian president talks about further destruction of the Amazonian rainforest, one of our earth's great lungs. More creatures appear on the endangered list. Yet many global politicians put addressing this issue that faces all of us well down the political agenda. Its solution is undeniably complex; its denial is undeniably suicidal for the world.

What about the forgotten war in Yemen, perniciously wiping out a population through violence and starvation, this proxy war being fought in a distant land and sponsored by major powers. 75% of the population need humanitarian support; 17.8 million don't know where their next meal will come from; 16 million don't have access to safe water or basic sanitation; 25% of children are out of school; 2 million people have been forced from their homes. Peace talks in Stockholm have only just begun, and the talk, maybe realistically, is only of taking small steps.

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John the Baptist, in the long line of prophets, spoke into an anxious and self-obsessed world, different from our day, but familiar in many ways. He spoke from the stark wilderness, a frightening place with harsh conditions, loneliness, hardship and suffering. But from that

improbable place, with the word 'Repent', John called out for women and men to turn around, change direction, change minds, reorient. He spoke on a threshold of time. We have the feeling that something is about to happen. And it is. Jesus is coming. And if the coming of Jesus means anything at all to any one of us, it must surely be a challenge to hope. Not to despair; not to give in to fatalism; not to believe that we can do nothing; but to hope, actively, practically, faithfully, honestly, spiritually.

Hope is worth sacrifice, for something might happen at any moment. Someone will happen at any moment, and He is Jesus.

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Repent. Be baptised. Prepare the way of the Lord. Make His paths straight. Mountains will be made low. Crooked paths will be made straight. Rough ways will be made smooth. God is coming.

Are we working towards this? In our politics? In our church? In the world? What are we doing to prepare for the coming of the God's Kingdom, so that people can see it, hear it, feel it, experience it, now?

Pope Francis has said, "An authentic faith – which is never comfortable or completely personal – always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it."

I say: when the time comes, will you join with me?

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen