

Advent 2
5/12/2004

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 11:1-10
Psalm 72
Romans 15:4-13
Matthew 3:1-12

Repent: turn towards God because God has turned towards you

If you ever visit Wave Rock near the wheat belt town of Hyden in Western Australia, look carefully on the road you travel near the town. For five weeks in the summer of 1970 your minister was a road worker who helped lay that road. One of the things you learn is that the final result of a smooth clear path comes after a lot of preparation that disturbs the surface, sometimes at a deep level.

John the Baptist was a road worker. He came from the back blocks and his preaching is linked with the words of the prophet: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." It was 200 years since there had been any prophets in Israel. Once John appeared people would have been attracted to him out of sheer curiosity. He was a phenomenon, but there was more to him than that. He preached: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

REPENT is based on a Hebrew word SHUVE, which means RETURN. It is often translated TURN AROUND. The story which best depicts what is meant by repentance is that of the Prodigal Son. After he had gone his own way, and exhausted his resources, he decided to RETURN home and make a fresh start. He went through a deep-seated change of heart, which led to a complete reorientation of life.

There are two ways of understanding repentance. The first is negative. It involves recognising that a wrong direction has been taken or that an abnormal state of affairs exists. Old style conservative preachers liked to play on this. They would try to harass people about their sins. And usually the things they understood sin to be were mostly of a sexual nature. They would try to scare people by playing on their vulnerability. We could try that. We could attack people for their faults, and sometimes we should. There are many shortcomings in our own lives, that of our nation and our church. Repentance is called for and if we are to be true to the spirit of Advent in preparing a straight road for God, there will be some things to sort out. Where has our worship been empty, where have we not focussed on the loving, life giving things that reconcile, where are we going along with injustice. Advent is a time when the rough figure of John the Baptist confronts us and asks us whether we are indeed living a godly life?

There is a positive way to understand repentance. There is the alcoholic who gave up drinking when he found someone cared about him, unconditionally and for himself. Repentance takes place when hope springs to life in a person who has been badly depressed making it possible for them to believe in the future again and find a new freedom for life. It happens when someone whose life has seemed to be stuck in a logjam is freed and things flow once more. You can see the difference: in their face, in the way they walk, in the way they are with other people. Life flows, and new things start to grow. Some form of release has come and people are able to turn towards something good - repentance is a reality.

John the Baptist's call to repentance seems negative, but at bottom it is actually positive. He calls for change in his hearers **BECAUSE THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN HAS COME NEAR**. In simple language that means **THE POWER OF GOD IS NEAR**. He did not say, **GET READY FOR THE FUTURE**. He said get ready for God: the most important thing ever is on the doorstep. What John brought was news of a wondrous gift to us, a gift, which makes it possible to turn around and embrace a new path in life.

If you have ever been stuck and really waited for something, or longed for a change to occur then it may be possible to put yourself in the place of John's audience. For two centuries there had been no word from the Lord, and the people were captives again. Then John appeared with this breathtaking news. No wonder they flocked out to hear him.

But **GOD IS NEAR** meant that things could not stay the same. The task of smoothing the road for the coming of God involved digging things up and settling them down in new ways. John challenged all members of his audience to make room for profound changes. The religious leaders in particular were called to account. There could be no reliance on the merits of their ancestry, or their qualifications. What this really meant was there was no more room for religion that relied on itself, rather than God.

John is an awkward character and in some ways it seems inappropriate for him to show up before Christmas. His preaching forms a bridge between the warmth of the infancy stories of Matthew and the commencement of Jesus' ministry, ending in the Cross. That he appears as we begin to turn towards the story of the birth makes a point we must not forget. This birth was a life-changing event, altering forever the choices we have about the direction we take in life. All of that became clearer later on, but John is here to point us to the most important thing: God was present in the birth Jesus of Nazareth. When he grew and began to preach Jesus used exactly the same words as John, and like John he called us to a deep conversion of heart. The question is are we open to this? Not once, as we prepare to celebrate the joyful feast of Christmas. But are we ready to be open to this, continually, throughout our life?