

Luke 3:1-18

Well, it's the second Sunday of Advent! We spend the next 3 weeks preparing to celebrate Christmas, the birth of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. As we prepare our hearts to again celebrate this incredible event of God, breaking into human history as a person, today, we remember how John the Baptist prepared people to receive Jesus when he first began his ministry. He focused his message on repentance. If we want to grow in our relationship with God through God's Son Jesus, recognizing and confessing our own sin is an important step. All people are influenced by sin, that force that pulls us away from God. We then become more self-centred. We start to worry too much about how we are doing, rather than caring for others. Because of this, we need to make repentance a regular part of our lives. Where have you recently fallen short of God's calling to love other people as yourself?

John encouraged people to repent of their sin and be baptised as a sign of that repentance. Repentance means turning from the direction in which you're going and heading in a new direction, towards God. It may be a major turn, or it might be just a slight correction. Even that can have a significant effect, though. In an airplane, even a slight change in the way we're heading can take us to a very different location, 100 or 1000 km later. I read how

"A remorseful man, wanting to reassure his skeptical [friend], said: "I'm going to make a 360-degree turn!"

"That's the kind of change a lot of people make. A 360-degree turn is no change at all. What we [often] need is a 180-degree change, a reverse direction, a U-Turn.

"In driving, U-turns are handy when we realize we're going in the wrong way. The same is true in life... [Repentance] involves a change of heart, a change of mind and a change of direction.

"What direction are you traveling right now?"

In all our decisions it's helpful to think about whether we're heading closer to God and the way of Jesus Christ, or if we're heading further away. Do our lives show the fruit of our faith?

In his Gospel account, Luke begins the story of John the Baptist in a similar way in which he begins the story of Jesus, with a specific time, location, and description of who the main political leaders were at the time. This introduction is also like the one used to introduce the famous prophet, Jeremiah... In addition, like with Jeremiah and other famous prophets, we read the phrase, "The word of God came to..." him. In other words, John the Baptist was an important person, equal in significance to other famous leaders in the faith. "He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." He called people to repent and receive baptism. In this way he prepared people's hearts to receive Jesus who would soon come after him.

One area in which many needed to repent was in the area of salvation and the coming judgement. They thought that as "God's chosen people" with the famous Abraham as their ancestor they were destined for heaven and would not be subject to God's judgement. But, John is clear that they cannot rely on their heritage so "save" them. They need to "bear fruits worthy of repentance." Their lives needed to show evidence that they have repented, that they've made a change. There are always areas where we can change if we want to grow in a relationship with God. Repentance of sin is a significant way to draw nearer to God.

John the Baptist was preparing people to receive Jesus. John baptised people with water as a sign of their confession of sin and desire to change. Water symbolises washing clean. It symbolises forgiveness. John clearly pointed to Jesus as the one who would be much greater than him. He would be full of the Holy Spirit of the Almighty God. John's water-baptism would be the outer sign of the people's repentance, but Jesus would bring the inner purification of a baptism of the Spirit and fire. These words symbolize how people would be purified through Jesus. All their imperfections and sin would be burned away through a relationship with him.

John uses symbolic language of fire, such as with trees that don't bear fruit being cut down and thrown into a fire. He says that Jesus would "gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he

would burn with unquenchable fire.” The wheat, those who are bearing fruit, will be gathered into God’s family while the chaff, those who are not bearing fruit will be sent to the unquenchable fire.” This fire image is likely meant to mean purification rather than just punishment. The addition of “unquenchable” gives a sense that there will be no escape. The purpose would be for the evil to be burned away so that those who face the judgement can draw near to God. God’s judgement is a very serious thing, and it could be very painful for us in those areas where we are shown that we’ve fallen short of God’s perfect will. But, notice the very next verse, verse 18. “So, with many other exhortations, (John) proclaimed the good news to the people. This is good news! Our image of judgement may be that it is eternal punishment, but here the likely purpose is more to help us, to cleanse us.

Judgement means those who are poor and oppressed will be lifted up and given equal status to others. The proud will be brought down, and there will be justice. All that is wrong will be made right. That’s good news! The good news is that this all happens through Jesus Christ, the Son of God who came to earth in the form of a man at Christmas. Through him, we see how God created us to live. We also see how much God loves us through his sacrifice for us on the cross and rising to new life as Lord of all. The Apostle Paul tells us “There is no longer condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” (Rom.8:1). When we admit our weakness, and repent of our sin, we open our hearts to receive the forgiveness of sin offered through Christ.

John the Baptist called people to repent. And, the fruit of their repentance should be evident in the way they lived. There must be evidence, fruits of our faith shown in our lives. The crowd asks John what they should do. He gives practical ideas. If you have two coats, share with someone who has none. Share what you have, clothing, food, other material things. To those who collect taxes he said they were not to collect more than their prescribed amount. Soldiers are not to extort people, threaten or force others to get money. Instead, they are to be satisfied with what they have. These were all very practical ways in which people in those days could share God’s love with those around them. For us, it would likely be different, but a similar idea. There are many opportunities to share the abundance of what God has given us, even in times when we feel like we don’t have enough. We can also learn to be satisfied with what we have and trust God to provide for our needs. It’s the influence of sin that causes us to worry too much about ourselves, or to hesitate to share with others.

We can understand the value of sharing and caring for others, of being satisfied with what we have, of trusting in God to provide. But, sometimes we may not have the courage to take steps of faith to carry out these things. The other day, Rie and I were thinking about how it is so easy to have our faith stuck just in our heads but not in our hands. It’s easy to keep thinking over and over about how to do this or that, what is God’s will, what is not, what do we believe, and so on. The problem is that sometimes our faith just stays in our heads, and never comes out in our actions. One criticism I’ve heard against Christians is that they often don’t look or act much different than others who are not Christians. Sometimes, they even look worse, especially when people sense that they are looking down on others who aren’t Christians.

Some of us may often think too much, and hesitate to take action. But, the main reason is likely fear – fear of failure, fear of embarrassment, fear of someone getting angry.... And so, rather than put our trust in God and take a step of obedience in some area, we think and think, and calculate if the step will be a safe one where we don’t run into problems. If God is calling us to take a step in some area, and we avoid listening, and instead try to make sure there will be no problems if we take the step, we may end up never moving. That result ends up being disobedience. Allowing fear to paralyze us is the result of sin. We then need to repent and accept God’s forgiveness, offered through Jesus.

In what areas do we need to repent? We may think of our personal situations. We may think about our church. Or we might think beyond our church to our communities and our world. Our world is filled with problems. We regularly hear about the evil of war between Russia and the Ukraine, or the war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza. Millions of people have suffered.

We may talk a lot about promoting peace, and praying for an end to the wars, but then we ourselves end up in conflict with people around us. How do we work at peace in our own relationships?

What is the way to take for followers of Jesus? We need to look at his life and teachings to understand God's ways. He calls us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. And, he lived that way, even to the point of death on a cross. From the cross he prayed that God would forgive them, for they do not realise what they are doing. 1 Peter 2:22-24 gives us an example of how we are called to live:

For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his footsteps: "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." When they heaped abuse on him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats, but entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. "By his stripes you are healed."

So, we are called to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. The only way to do this is to repent of our self-centred ways and accept his access to our heart. Then, he can give us the power to grow more like him. By letting go of our concern for ourselves we can allow Jesus to fill us with his love. The evidence will be seen when it flows out of us as we share blessings to those around us. Let's pray.

Loving God, as we look forward to celebrating the birth of your Son, Jesus, we pray that you would give us the courage to let go of our fears, and draw near to you. Help us to trust in your leading. We desire to grow in you, that we may bear fruit in our lives. May your power flow through us as your servants, that others around us may be blessed, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.