

The text: Mark 1:1-8

When we think of “snap, crackle and pop”, Rice Bubbles or Coco Pops would normally come to mind, but not munching on a bowl of locusts! I’ve always wondered why this would have been the staple diet for John the Baptist. But it seems locusts are not unusual to the palate of the Israelis and people there still eat locusts today. The wings and legs are torn off, bodies dried, roasted, or ground up and baked, seasoned with salt. Mixed with honey, locusts would provide a meal rich in protein, minerals and sugar and would have given John the Baptist valuable sustenance during his preaching in the desert.

Then there is John’s wardrobe. I guess his fashion stylist was going for the ‘wild’ look. Wearing a garment made of camel’s hair with a leather belt while standing in the desert under a hot sun isn’t something we might picture as particularly comfortable or desirable. But this was the customary clothing of a prophet, noted in Zechariah 13.

However Mark doesn’t include detail of John’s wardrobe and diet to explain the practical reasons for them, but to highlight the deep symbolical significance they carry. John’s clothing conveyed a message in itself. The people who came to John would identify him as a spokesman from God, and more particularly, the one of whom the Old Testament prophets had spoken. John’s meal, so unusual to us, would have evoked memories of God’s promise to the Israelites to bring them into their own land, a good land with abundant supply from God, a land flowing with milk and honey. Yet the locusts would also bring to remembrance God’s judgment on Israel; his warning that he would send a locust plague to devastate the land, sparking a national fast and mourning, during which the people were called to “rend their hearts, not their garments.”

As the Israelites came to John in the hot, uninhabited wilderness which in itself symbolised the spiritual state of the nation, they would have been reminded of their desert wanderings for forty years because of their grumbling and lack of faith. Yet as John stood there by the Jordan River, the location would have been striking for another reason: the Jordan was the gateway for Israel to enter into their new land that God had promised. So John’s ministry location was significant in itself. It is time to repent—a time for new beginnings. Indeed John had been sent by God as the forerunner to Jesus: “After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

John's task was to confront the people so that their hearts could be prepared to receive their Saviour. And so he preached a baptism of repentance.

'Repentance'—that is a hard word for human ears to hear. It's a thought laughable to the world. Even to God's own people it's a word that grates in our ears, wounding our pride. No one likes hearing that word, especially at this time of year. It's a word that doesn't fit with the candy canes and Christmas cards we receive, the carols wafting through the speakers in the shopping centres, the tinsel, Christmas lights, and fake snow in the windows. "Society's changed and the church needs to change with it," people say.

But as we wait in hope for our Lord's coming, John's words in the wilderness are more relevant than ever. They are not words out of sync with our culture and shifting morals. They *are* God's words for us today, the church standing in the materialistic wasteland of our Western world. How might John's sermon be relevant to us today? Did God give us a level of pride so great that it excuses his commandment to love? Did He call us to be judge over our brother and sister and decide who is forgiven, and when? Did he call us to lift ourselves above others and to be indifferent and insensitive to their needs? Did he call us to become workaholics and work hard at winning the approval of others rather than serving Christ? What—or who—do we look to for our security, worth, approval and peace? If the affirmation of others, or the things we do—even our service to the church—or our accomplishments and achievements take the place of Christ, then they are all idols.

The word 'repent' means a complete about-face; a U-turn. That's something that we can't actually do by our own strength. But the Good News in John's preaching of repentance is his preaching of a *baptism* of repentance. Baptism is the means for repentance and baptism is God's work. The change within comes after the washing. Through John's preaching in the wilderness, God led the people to John to be baptised, to cleanse and change the hearts of his people, so that by God's work in baptism they were now empowered to repent and prepare for Christ's coming.

The Good News of Advent is that God longs to forgive people and give them his peace. How do we know? The purpose of repentance is to receive the forgiveness of sins. The word for forgive literally means to send away, to untie, to release. God knows that is not a work human beings can manage. So he sent the One who John was pointing ahead to. God made the paths straight all the way from heaven to earth when he sent Jesus into the world for you and came to you when he baptised

you with his Holy Spirit to make you holy. Through the preaching of God's Word the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of his people and moves them to turn towards Jesus *with* our sins, for him to release us from them.

It's a harsh world out there. A wilderness, where people are lost and confused by so many competing ideologies about life and spirituality, promising so much hope and fulfilment, but delivering so little. A wilderness where people are consumed by the consumer lifestyle trying to shop their way to happiness and create the perfect Christmas paradise. A wilderness where people carry the burden and anxiety of the longing to be loved. A wilderness of pain from the cycle of selfish abuse and neglect at the hands of others who care only about themselves.

Humans devise many ways to attempt to deal with sin. We can justify it: "They deserved it!" We can rationalise it: "It was done in the name of love, and I was just trying to help." We can reframe it in more acceptable language—"It was a spirited conversation" even though it was really a volatile argument. We can simply attempt to cover it up. Or we can even blame God, and say it's the personality we were born with.

The Advent message is the message of the hope we have in Christ—not hope as the world understands but an expectation that Christ will come again. We also expect him to be with us now, here, through his word, because that is how he has promised to bring you his grace. Indeed the One whom John pointed to and called the people to prepare for, has arrived *and keeps on arriving in every worship service*. Here, in the church, is our refuge, for Christ *is* here. He will not drive us away but will turn us, with our sin, toward himself, to show us his mercy and favour.

This is what makes the church different from any other organisation in the world. Jesus doesn't deal with your sin the way the world would deal with sin. He doesn't bury your sin deeper by covering it up, but he lifts you up out of the pit. He doesn't reframe it but releases you from it. He doesn't justify it but he justifies you. Some say that right preparation for attending worship would be to leave our sins at the door before we enter church. No. Bring them in, with you. Bring them here. Because here is the Good News of the forgiveness of sins. Jesus bestows on you peace that the world cannot give, because it is the peace given to you from your Heavenly Father.

Peace be with you. Amen