**Sermon for the Second Sunday in Advent (10/12/2023)**

**Preparing Others and Ourselves for the Coming of the Lord (Mark 1:1–8)**

*By Sean Pierce Hotinski*

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

John the Baptist is probably not the first figure we would imagine when thinking about the season of Christmas. We tend to think about Christmas as mainly a season where we gather round the dinner table with family and friends, and celebrate the joy of gift-giving. We don’t tend to think of Christmas as a time of repentance—and some would even think of that as dampening the mood of Christmas. And yet, the Christian Church has always seen John the Baptist’s message as a fundamental part of Christmas, by including him in the lectionary Bible readings during the season of Advent every year. And John’s message was all about repentance.

After briefly introducing Jesus as the Christ and Son of God, Mark then introduces us to John the Baptist, whose coming was prophesied by two prophets: Malachi and Isaiah. To start off with, one could describe John as a social outcast of his day. He dwelt in the wilderness, lived on a strict simple diet, and wore unique clothing that resembled the clothing of Elijah and other Old Testament prophets, all of which made John stand out (Mark 1:6). In terms of his character, Mark describes John as a righteous and holy man, when narrating the account of John’s execution at the hands of Herod (Mark 6:20). But despite his upright character, John wasn’t always popular with the crowds. Jesus reports, in Matthew 11, that John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, “He has a demon” (Matthew 11:18). Apparently, John’s strict and unique lifestyle caused others to think he was oppressed by demonic forces. It probably didn’t help, either, that John told people the exact thing no one wants to hear: that they need to repent of their sins.

Isaiah declares that John came to prepare the way for the Lord, and the Hebrew word for “Lord” in Isaiah is actually “Yahweh”, God’s personal name in the Old Testament, which means that John came to prepare the way for God almighty himself (Isaiah 40:3). This is one of the ways that the Bible teaches the deity or divinity of Christ. The Old Testament makes prophecies that are clearly about God himself and the New Testament says that Jesus fulfils those prophecies. In the Bible, no human is ever attributed to fulfilling a biblical prophecy that refers to God; only Jesus is, because he is, as the Bible says, God (John 1:1, 14). He is of one being with the Father and the Holy Spirit. In fact, earlier when we heard Mark call Jesus the Son of God, even that points towards his deity. Because John chapter 1 clearly teaches that Jesus has been the Son of God for all eternity, and only God is eternal. And John chapter 5 says that by calling God his own Father, Jesus was making himself equal with God (John 5:18), and no created being can claim equality with God.

So, John is a messenger of God almighty. And Mark tells us how John was preparing the way for Jesus: by proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and baptising people in the Jordan River (Mark 1:4). It's worth pointing out that repentance is not simply feeling contrition or sorrow for one’s sins. Repentance is when one turns their entire person or being to God, and this change in our hearts is not brought about by us in the first place, but the Holy Spirit, who conforms our wills to God’s will. In our reading, John said “I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Mark 1:8). Jesus first baptised his disciples with the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples, manifesting himself like tongues of fire, and gave them power. But Jesus didn’t stop there. Jesus continues to baptise people with the Holy Spirit to this day whenever people receive the Sacrament of Baptism, because Jesus teaches that we are born again by water and the Spirit (John 3:5).

Repentance produces two ways of living in our lives. Firstly, it results in forsaking the things in our lives that displease God. Isaiah says, in chapter 59, that sin separates people from God (Isaiah 59:2), because it’s displeasing to him (Isaiah 59:15). Sinning can be compared to us pushing God away from our hearts. It’s like we have no room for the light; we want the darkness instead. But when we forsake evil upon repenting, we make room for God, the True Light, in our hearts and we draw near to him, just as he first draws near to us in calling us back to himself whenever we stray (James 4:8). Secondly, repentance results in us pursuing, seeking, and loving the things that are pleasing to God, like truth, beauty, and goodness (Luke 3:8; John 14:15; Colossians 3:1–4).

So, how was John bringing people to repentance preparing them for their King? Because, when a person turns their entire being to God, they will recognise Jesus as their King and Saviour, because such a person also actively pursues and seeks the truth of God. This is exactly what Jesus teaches, when he says, in John chapter 7, “If anyone's will is to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority” (John 7:17).

I’ll end this message with two takeaways from this text. Firstly, it’s okay to be a social outcast. In fact, if you’re sitting here today, it means that most likely, you already are one to some extent. As Christians living in 21st century Australia, most people around us would consider us strange for going to church on a regular basis, because they say things like, “church is a waste of time” or “there’s no need for church in the first place”. Many around us even reject something as basic and self-evident as the existence of God himself, and call belief in God childish, something that needs to be outgrown. Just knowing that this is the way many people feel, can make us feel uncomfortable, even if no one tells it to us directly.

But remember that the critics of God in John’s day said that John had a demon. But despite this, John wasn’t ashamed of the Gospel. He didn’t stop doing what he was doing, just because others slandered him for it, or looked down upon him for it. He knew that he looked and sounded weird to the world, but he didn’t care. Our reading tells us that, ”all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins” (Mark 1:5). That’s a lot of people who relied on John’s spiritual guidance.

John continued what he did because he was given a mandate by God himself to prepare people for the Lord, and because he knew that there were many who needed to hear his Christian hope. And in following God’s mandate, John was doing something that held the deepest and truest meaning and value in life. Let’s remember that, whenever we feel uncomfortable by our social standing in this multi-faith, secular humanistic society. This world still needs the Christian hope that we have, just as the crowds in John’s day did who went to his baptism, and we can share it with those who seek it.

Which brings me to my second takeaway: we too can prepare the way for the Lord, in a similar way to John. First, John prepared the way of the Lord for others, by calling them to repent, and while it might be awkward to tell people in this day and age to repent, another way of looking at this is that a call to repentance is basically a call for people to realise their need for God every day in their lives, and their absolute dependence on him. So, that’s one way we could frame it in our conversations. Coming to repentance is realising that there is no gift that we can give to God; no work that we can render to him; no praise that we can offer to him, that is, and ever will be, sufficient.

Prior to becoming Christians, we were dead in our sins (Ephesians 2:1). But when the time was right, Jesus came into the world to give life to the world, by giving up his life for us on the cross and raising it up again on the third day (John 10:17–18). Because he lives, we who believe in him will also live (John 14:19). There is no self-sufficiency here, but only total dependence on God. So, we can prepare the way for the Lord, by always being prepared to answer those who come to us and question our Christian hope (1 Peter 3:15). And then, we can tell them of their need to rely on Jesus as their only Saviour.

Second, John prepared the way of the Lord into his own heart, by himself living a holy life. This doesn’t mean we have to live in the desert and eat locusts and wild honey, as John did. Although, fasting can be a good way of shifting our focus from ourselves and our wants to God as the one who provides for us. But it does mean that we have to love God and our neighbour. And a good reminder of this is the reason why we were baptised. Just as John baptised others in the Jordan River to prepare them for the Lord, we too have been baptised by Jesus, into God’s holy name for holy living. We were baptised not only to be saved, but also to live a life that honours God above all (Ephesians 2:10). That is our divine mandate; our calling from God almighty.

It’s about making God our highest priority, and ordering everything that we do in our lives around him, to the best of our abilities. And this starts with an attitude of humility: when we acknowledge that we are sinners who fall short of God’s glory every day. And so, we turn to God with our whole being in repentance, to receive forgiveness from him, and to also seek help from him to live the life that he wants us to live. We can’t do this on our own. But that’s what Christmas is all about; it’s about God the Father sending his only Son, the man Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit, to do what we could not do ourselves. The same God who reconciled us to himself by the blood of his cross dwells in our hearts by faith, and he is at work in our lives for our sanctification. If we abide in him, and allow him to work in us, we will be prepared for the Lord’s coming. Amen.