

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Luke 3:1-6

Here we are just two weeks or so from Christmas and we have this strange character appearing in our readings. John the Baptist is the most unlikely Christmas character that we are ever going to meet, yet every year he shows up just before Christmas.

John stands at the outskirts of Christmas, in the wilderness, and thunders out his message of *“Turn back to God and be baptised! Then your sins will be forgiven”*. John puts pressure on people to look at themselves and then change whatever they need to change.

John the Baptist was rough, tough, bold and blunt as he spoke to the people. But sometimes tough words that knock us down, shock us into seeing that there is plenty of room for change, are needed. Most times, though, we think that what is being said doesn't refer to us who have been baptised, attend worship regularly, and help out at the church. Hard words are needed to get through the false image that we have of ourselves, to help us realize that the call to renounce our sin and renew our commitment to God, applies equally to us, as to everyone else.

But why do we have to listen to John the Baptist and his rough and crude words at this time of the year. Christmas is the season of love, peace, and happiness. We don't need to hear all of this now, just a couple of weeks before Christmas. We should be hearing about mangers, shepherds, and angels, and the good

news that a Saviour has been born in the city of David. However, before we get to hear about Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus, we need to hear John's call to "*turn away from our sins*", because this has everything to do with Christmas. Before we can have Christmas we have to hear these words of John that say, "Get ready". Before we can fully appreciate what God has done for us at Christmas, we have to understand why He did it.

At this time of the year we are busy getting ready for Christmas in many different ways. We retrieve our Christmas tree from wherever it has been stored, and spend a lot of time trying to figure out which bulb on the string of lights is the one that is causing the whole string not to work. We decorate and clean the house, buy Christmas gifts, and plan to visit relatives, or have them over on Christmas Day. But the kind of getting ready that John is talking about, is renouncing our sin and making a new commitment to live lives worthy of our calling as one of God's special people.

That's where John's tough words come in. He knows the human heart all too well. If he speaks softly and gently, his words won't penetrate the hardness of our hearts. They will bounce right off; so he speaks loudly: "*You snakes! Do those things that will show that you have turned away from your sins*". He went on to warn those who refuse to turn from their sinfulness that, "*Every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire*".

At first, John's tough words jolt us in this season of peace and joy. Hard words hurt, but at the same time, these hard words are good news, because they lead us back to God. His stern words were designed to make human hearts ready for the Saviour. Yes,

John the Baptist was tough on the mess that sin makes of our relationship with God, and how we deal with other people.

However, if John were here with us today, his message would be exactly the same, or maybe even more blunt, because we have a well developed sense of hearing only what we want to hear.

So, we still need to listen to John the Baptist as he challenges us once again this Advent season. *“Turn away from your sins.*

Stop your excuses. Do those things that will show that you have turned from your sin, and that you are truly full time followers of the Messiah, not only followers when it happens to suit you. Stop pretending that everyone else owes you a favour because you have done so much. Get rid of that attitude that only wants to receive, and never offer anything back in return”.

John the Baptist urges us to clean away the garbage in our lives, to clear away every bit of mess that sin causes. Clear away selfishness and an uncaring, unfriendly attitude. Clear away dishonesty, greed and a focus on material things. Clear away dissatisfaction with who we are and what we have received from God's hand. Clear away all immorality and everything that opposes God's will for our lives. Repent, turn away, from everything that is contrary to the way God wants us to live as His people.

That's not an easy thing to do. In fact, it's near impossible for us to turn around our lives just by sheer will power. Let's face it, we enjoy certain sins. We can't help ourselves. We are compulsive sinners, and anyone who thinks they are not, need to hear again the words of Jesus Christ when He said, *"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and there is no truth in us".*

In this time before Christmas, let's not be offended by those tough words of John the Baptist, "*Turn back to God. Do those things that will show that you have turned from your sins*". John speaks tough to us for our own good. He speaks tough like a parent who speaks loudly and clearly points out a child's wrongdoing. Parents do this to make the child a better person and avoid the same kind of wrong in the future. When a parent forcefully highlights the wrong that has been done, the child then appreciates all the more the parents words, "I love you", "I forgive you". If the child doesn't appreciate the fact that he/she has done wrong, the beauty of the parent's love and forgiveness will be missed.

As we listen to John's tough message this Advent, may we again appreciate our need for the Saviour born in Bethlehem who died to forgive our sins, and rose again to defeat the power of death over us.

John's message was, and still is, indeed tough, and at times rude and blunt. Listen to the voice calling in the wilderness and hear the good news. "*Prepare the way of the Lord. Turn away from your sin*" and "*receive the salvation of God*".

AMEN.