

Matt 3: 1- 12 **John the Baptist**

As some of you may know, Tolstoy wrote a short story called, "Where Love is, God is". It tells the story of a man called Martin, whose son died, following an illness. We are told that Martin gives way to despair, "a despair so great and overwhelming that he murmured against God." Martin wanted to die; he lost hope; his life had lost meaning and purpose.

One day, an old man confronts Martin and says that the reason Martin was despairing was because he had wished to live for his own happiness; to which Martin replies, "What else should I live for?" The old man answers "For God...He gives you life and you must live for him". What Martin discovers as the story unfolds is that in the gospels he finds how God wants him to live. Through the gospels, Martin is restored.

This Advent, as we embark on our journey of navigating our way through the Christian story once again, guided in this liturgical year mostly by Matthew, we too can find how God wants us to live; and I would suggest that what we discover in our Gospel reading this morning could be a first step along the way.

As we heard in our reading, "In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

The Judean desert was a place which was a scene of bleak desolation, where nothing grew; and this physical context serves as a metaphor for the emptiness of religious observances and the spiritual aridity which John's message came to address.

It is into this desert scene John comes to bring the message of the kingdom. It was into a dark world that he came to announce the ministry of the Light of the World, Jesus Christ.

John was an inspired preacher, one in whom people could see the power of God at work. And his words resonated in people's hearts, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight". God was going to break into the world afresh, and everything was going to change – even the way God would communicate with his people would change; even how they understood justice and mercy, grace and hope.

The oppressed Jews looked forward eagerly to the coming messiah and many listened to what John had to say, because his teaching was firmly

anchored in their religious traditions. John was speaking their language; but he took people from where they were and from within their cultural context, and reframed it to make their faith a dynamic and living thing, ready for the new dawn which was about to break.

Whilst he uses the words and language of the Old Testament prophets, which sound quite frightening, we can see that hope is nonetheless embedded in it. He says, "One who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals."

So what does this message have to say for us? I would suggest that the message of John is that in order to take part in the Kingdom of Heaven, we must also examine ourselves, repent of our wrongdoing, forgive and accept forgiveness.

As we can see from the liturgical colour-clue of purple vestments, Advent is a penitential season. It is a time for us to take stock of our lives; to ask ourselves where our passions lie. How passionate are we about our faith? Do we, like the religious leaders of John's day, tend to rest on our laurels and take comfort from religious rituals and practices, without really living out the implications of our discipleship in our daily lives? How often do we practice repentance on a day to day basis? How often do we say or do hurtful things? How often are we at odds with those amongst whom we live or work?

John's call to repentance is not just a call to feel remorse, or to feel sad or embarrassed about certain aspects of our lives about which we may not be very proud: it is more than that. It is a call to acknowledge the reality of our lives and to seek God's help in seeking transformation in the light of the Advent Messiah.

The good news is that, as I said earlier, past the harsh words, past the condemnation of John the Baptist, there is hope; Advent light; the promise of Christ's coming and of the kingdom of heaven. The Advent of Jesus is, then, an advent of peace and grace, mercy and love for all who sincerely seek to follow Christ.

Just as the character in Tolstoy's story learned how to live according to the gospels, this Advent season we too can press the "refresh" button on our lives and start again to try to seek to find out how God wants us to live day by day, in faith and hope and love.