

John the Baptist

A sermon preached at Lindfield Uniting Church on Sunday 4 December 2022, by David Gill. The readings for the second Sunday of Advent were Isaiah 11:1-10, Romans 15:4-13 and St Matthew 3:1-12

The Second Sunday of Advent. Last Sunday the curtain rose once again on the church's year-long replay of the Jesus drama. Suddenly, today, there thunders on to the stage that strange character they called John the Baptizer.

He has come stumbling out of the wilderness, seen in those days as a place of spiritual testing, spiritual insight. He must have looked a mess. Gaunt, after his diet of locusts and wild honey. Clad in rags – rough, camel hair rags, at that. With an unkempt beard and a passionate, perhaps slightly manic glare in his eyes, he went around shouting at people to repent.

All considered, John the Baptist does not sound like a particularly fun drinking companion. He's not someone you'd choose as your next door neighbour. Probably not someone you'd choose as your minister at Lindfield either – being called a brood of vipers every Sunday would test even the remarkable patience of this congregation.

What are we to make of this wild man from the wilderness? John himself can be dismissed easily enough as an eccentric. But don't dismiss too quickly the message he brought, or his role in the subsequent recognition of Jesus of Nazareth. For the gospels seem to suggest that he was saying something important. Two things, in fact.

First, John was a pointer. Like one of those signs you see when travelling as a tourist.

"Look," they say. "Pay attention. Here is something – a view, a building, a historic site – that you shouldn't miss".

"Look," John is saying. "Pay attention. Here is someone you should not miss. Here is the one for whom Isaiah and the other prophets yearned. Here is the man so long awaited. The man whose significance is cosmic."

Second, John was telling people to get ready. Big things are happening, he announced. The kingdom of God is at hand. The reign of love is coming. The one so long awaited is at the door. So, as boy scouts used to be told, be prepared!

There will be no privileged in-group, no disregarded out-group. We all face judgement. So, for God's sake and your own, take stock of yourselves and repent.

By repent, John doesn't mean people must feel sad or guilty. There's no virtue in going around with a long face. He means people need to change. Repentance is about reversing direction, taking hold of your life and doing a U-turn with it.

That message is for us too. It is echoed in Advent's call to make ourselves ready, to change. *Change?* Now there's a word that gives church people conniptions.

Some years ago, at a meeting of the governing body of the National Council of Churches in Australia, our then president, Archbishop Aghan Baliozian, was getting around in a wheelchair. He had fallen and sprained his ankle while trying to change a light bulb.

It was an opportunity too good to miss. I announced a competition for the best answer to the question: how many bishops does it take to change a light bulb? The Uniting Church delegation won. Its answer? "You can't change that light bulb. Our grandfather gave the church that light bulb!"

There were nodding heads and rueful smiles right across the conference room. Every denomination knew the problem. Most congregations know the problem too. Change is always difficult.

But back to John the Baptist. He wasn't interested in mundane things like light bulbs. He wasn't demanding change for the sake of change. Nor was he just trying to bring things up to date a bit. He went deeper, much deeper.

He wanted the Jewish people to be true to who they were. To remember their special calling. To respond anew to the God who had been with them through good times and bad. To be ready for the history-bending event that was breaking upon the world.

He was calling his people to a profound spiritual renewal. His words call us, this Advent, to the same.

But ... take care! What to change? What not to change? And how to tell the difference?

That's a key question, for every church.

We're not called to safeguard defunct lightbulbs. But we are called to safeguard the faith once delivered to the saints. How to know when, on a particular issue, we should be ready to change, and when we should dig in our heels and resist? Often, the answer is obvious.

But sometimes it's not. What then?

Some tips.

First, remember that no congregation, no denomination, is alone. You and I are privileged to be caught up in the life of the church at a time when Christians across the world are trying, together, to refocus on the things that really matter and muster the courage to let go of at least some of the things that don't.

In the process of sorting out its trash from its treasure, every church needs the greater wisdom of the others. As well, of course, as a due respect for the wisdom of Christ's people through the ages.

Our denomination is not alone. It should never make major decisions as though it were.

Second, remember what John was calling for. Not an updating of his people's religion, much less a scrapping of it. He wanted his people to be true to their God-given identity, not to seek a substitute for it.

For Christians, the test of any call for change must be: does this echo the logic of the gospel? Be wary of any self-proclaimed "renewal" movement that's nothing more than faddishness. Don't touch those so-called prosperity gospels that appeal to peoples' ambition and self-interest. Avoid like the plague any movement that exploits judgementalism and division.

The way of Christ is always the way of love. And along that way there will always be a cross.

Third, remember that change -- real change, that is of God -- always surprises. We may appoint planning committees by the bus load. You may draft the most wonderful mission statement to edify the Presbytery of Sydney Central Coast. You may devise the most impressive programs, convinced beyond doubt that they nail exactly what is needed.

But be ready to be surprised, be very surprised. Renewal that is of God is exactly that -- a gift, something that comes from beyond ourselves, from the very source of life itself.

We may yearn for life-giving change. We may pray for it. We may clear away obstacles to it. We may receive and celebrate it. But we never create it.

One of the practices I've learned from charismatic and Pentecostal friends is the gesture of the open hands. The symbol of need, trust, confidence. And utter dependence.

In the spirit of John the Baptist, it is a gesture for the church in our time. A gesture that says come, O God, make us the church you want us to be. Kindle within us the fire of your love. And make us ready, this Advent, to meet our Redeemer.

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