

Background to the reading

In our reading Matthew is telling us about John the Baptist without giving us any other information about who he was, where he was coming from. It is only the Gospel writer Luke who gives us more information like that he was the son of the priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, that he grew to manhood in the wilderness of Judaea, where he also received his prophetic call. Luke also records that his birth was foretold by an angel. Luke in agreement to Matthew emphasizes his role as the one who has to prepare all the people to welcome the Saviour into the world.

In both accounts there is a strong reference to the association between John and Elijah who also lived in the desert, who also wore garment of hair and with a leather belt around his waist. John only ate locusts and honey because it was “clean”, as prescribed by the religious laws.

But Matthew is as always also referring to the rich OT background which lies behind John’s association with the wilderness, in this case the wilderness of Judea. It was in the wilderness that God revealed himself to Moses, gave the law, and entered into the covenant with Israel. It was also the site of refuge for David and Elijah, and in this light became the anticipated site of God’s future deliverance as we find in the prophecy of Isaiah 40:3.

THE MESSAGE of John the Baptist is clear: they must repent and be baptised. This would have been quite a shocking statement to Jews because it was only when pagans or gentiles wanted to embrace Judaism, that they were required to repent and then be baptised. Now John is telling the Jews that all of them must repent and be baptised. And Matthew is suggesting that a lot of Jews did come and were baptised. Later when some of the Jewish religious leaders came he told them that he is only baptising with water for repentance. If they want to be baptised they need to follow up their baptism with acts of repentance. He also told them that someone will come after him, which will have much more power than he, and that He will baptise them with fire and the Holy Spirit. But this person is standing with a

winnowing fork in his hand, and He will be “gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire”.

But John was also telling the Jews that they cannot assume that they are saved from God just because their ancestor is Abraham. No they must repent and obey God. The image of the tree is also an Old Testament image which usually applied to Israel but also to other nations. It simply emphasised the fate of the tree when it does not longer carry any fruit. When it happens, it must be cut off to make room for another tree who can bear fruit.

The listeners of Matthew could not have any more doubt about John’s role. In his own words: he is not even also says about the one that will precede him “whose sandals I am not fit to carry.” Usually in those days a slave carried their masters sandals. John is declaring that he is not worthy even to be Christ’s slave.

Amen

MP 503

O little town of Bethlehem

Sermon

The text verse for the sermon is verse 8 “ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance”.

In the Gospel of John the Jewish religious leaders asked who John the Baptist was? He clearly denied that he was the Messiah. In our reading this morning his message confirms his role. He is the voice who cries out in the desert, and who has to prepare the way of Jesus Christ.

But coming from 1994 South Africa I can understand very well why the people thought John the Baptist was the Messiah or even a prophet. I am saying this now in the aftermath of the death of Mr Nelson Mandela. Most black and coloured people thought of him as the “new messiah” who will make all the wrong things of apartheid right. But Mr Mandela was just like John someone who knew Jesus Christ was the only Messiah. Nelson Mandela was never afraid to openly proclaim his faith in the Lord. While John the Baptist was the one who prepared the way for Jesus - Mandela showed us all how to follow Jesus.

He was indeed someone who took the words of Jesus to heart. He could have ignited a bloody revolution against all his oppressors. He could have chosen hatred after his oppressors incarcerated him for 26 years. He chose love and reconciliation and brought peace to a much divided country. And all his actions glorified God. I heard him speak for the first time when he made his first speech at the University of Pretoria, a dominant conservative Afrikaner university. When he opened his mouth - with the tensions rising fast and furious, he spoke in fluent Afrikaans saying how much he admired the Afrikaners for their honesty and steadfastness. After this, no-one dared silencing him.

He indeed was a tree who produced the fruits of love, reconciliation, peace, justice, humility and hope. He followed in the way John the Baptist preached about Jesus. He was a true example of a follower of Jesus Christ.

Are we prepared to follow Jesus Christ this Christmas? Or are we just plodding along assuming like the Jewish religious leaders a long time ago that we are saved and that we have no need for actions to confirm our faith?

We as followers of Jesus Christ who have been baptised in His Holy Name have a wonderful and great opportunity this time of year to openly proclaim the values of what Jesus taught us. The values of faith and forgiveness. The values of reconciliation and peace. The values of love and hope. But if we do not follow up these values with actions or deeds, nothing will come of it.

People that receive gifts, usually show their appreciation through actions of praise. We need to do the same. We need to love more, forgive more, seek peace at all times, reconcile with other people, especially those that we “hate”. We need to be a blessing to everyone around us.

If we want people to miss us one day, we need to start living lives in relation to God that makes a difference everywhere we go. If we want people to follow Jesus, then we must be like John the Baptist whose actions fitted his words.

You and I have the opportunity every Sunday to listen to God’s word through His Holy Spirit. God is speaking. The question is: Are we listening to His voice or are we so absorbed in our own wisdom, in our knowledge and in our self appointed authority, that we miss what He is telling us.

John was just a messenger who told the people about Christ.

After Jesus was resurrected many other messengers till this day are proclaiming the same message.... The Jewish leaders, the majority of the Jews and the then local king did not listen to John’s message. And the same is true today. But the question remaining is: Are we listening?

May God help us all to listen to his voice calling out from the desert, I when I sit in my study preparing the sermon and you, sitting in the pews Sunday after Sunday...

Amen.