

REPENTING IS GOOD (AGAIN!)

We've got four gospels, but only two of them (Matthew and Luke) have what we would call the traditional Christmas prologue – the stories of Jesus' birth.

Today we have heard the opening of the other two –

John who has his own prologue to Jesus - the theology and poetry of his first chapter - and

Mark who is all about action – he wants to get straight down to the work of Jesus.

Jesus is adult and working speaking away before we even get to the end of chapter one.

But Mark does open his account with one other person - the guy who was preparing people to be ready for Jesus arriving on the scene.

And what that strange fella John the Baptist was trying to get across is that the arrival of Jesus marks something new, something different and something that is challenging.

When Jesus comes to our world and our lives we cannot stay the same.

For children marking Christmas, the challenge may come down to sticking tea towels on their heads again for the Nativity service, singing a few carols, and being reminded that Jesus is the reason why we have Christmas at all.

For adults marking Christmas, the challenge is more likely to be for us to reflect on how we are living as disciples of Christ – whether we are open to the challenges that he may bring to us in 2017.

For all that John was the guy that came to get people ready for Jesus - he and Jesus were quite different.

John was pretty tough, uncompromising and negative, the kind of guy you would imagine would do everything to the “letter” of the law.

On the other hand, Jesus was a lot more forgiving, compassionate and positive – much more interested in the spirit rather than the letter of the law. He was a gentler soul altogether.

But they shared together one word: one word which was at the heart of their message.

And the word was: REPENT.

Both of them use that same word in Mark Chapter One.

John called on people to repent. Jesus called on people to repent.

And REPENT is arguably *the* most misunderstood word in the Christian vocabulary.

And here is the biggest mistake we make with it:

WE THINK IT'S A NEGATIVE THING.

We've got this idea that "Repent" means - stop doing bad things.
Cut it out.
It could be huge issues – or trivial ones.

Stop stealing from the firm.
Stop being so busy all the time.
Stop this affair that threatens your relationship with your wife and family.
Stop wasting your money in the bookies.
Stop being so selfish in your outlook.
Stop being so grumpy towards your daughter.

Now even if we think well maybe it's true enough – maybe it's right to cut out bad stuff - *repent* is still a kind of a negative thing.
It's about **not** doing things. It's about stopping things.
Or it's about us doing **our duty**.
It's not very exciting.

But John and Jesus seemed to have a different emphases on "Repent."
With John and his teaching it seems a very scary, negative thing.
But when it gets to Jesus and *his* teaching it seems nothing of the kind.

Repentance basically means "*turning around*", or "*changing direction*".
Suppose you are flying out to Tenerife for a dose of midwinter sunshine and suddenly the plane has to turn around and fly back to Glasgow, changing direction may not be too attractive, but if your life is empty and dull or you're doing ninety miles an hour down a dead end street then turning around suddenly looks like a mighty fine idea.

"Repent, for the Kingdom of God has come near."

As Australian minister Nathan Nettleton has written...

This is not "repent" as in "*give up everything that's good in life.*"
This is "repent" as in "*don't miss the boat. Don't miss the opportunity of a lifetime. The Kingdom of God is near and you wouldn't want to be left behind.... Repentance doesn't mean much unless there is also something to turn to, and it's when we get a vision of what's being offered that repentance starts to make sense and look very attractive indeed.*"

(Nettleton)

Imagine a woman in an abusive relationship. Her husband hits her and beats her regularly. Her friends and family all know the score. They know that she needs to leave him for her own good. But she doesn't do it.

Why not?

Because she has got so used to what for her is "*the way life is*" that she can't actually imagine how she could have a different life – she can't picture how she could get away and stay away, and what life could be like if she began it anew.

She needs to change but in order for it to happen she needs a vision of another kind of life. When she gets that, then she will gain the courage and determination she needs to move her life on.

Imagine an alcoholic whose life with drink is out of control. He knows within himself he needs to change so why doesn't he move? It's because he needs to see what his life could be like – he needs to grasp a vision of a better future for himself. When he does that then he has the chance to take those steps.

The things that mar our own lives may be very different and may be less dramatic but the same truth applies.

If we need to turn and go in a new direction we need to know more than simply that our present life is not working as well as it could.

We need to realise that what we are turning to really is better and will be more fulfilling and purposeful and will steer us towards becoming a better person.

And that's why Jesus' approach was so much more effective than John the Baptist.

Jesus was brilliant at letting people see their potential – what they had it in them to become.

Jesus was great at pointing people to who they could be – how they could be the best version of themselves.

Spending time with Jesus was enough to change people's minds about who they were and what they were capable of, and peoples' lives changed for the better the more they spent time with him.

John seems to be saying *"Stop doing bad things. Cut out things that are wrong in your life."*

It's hard to argue with that.

But Jesus is saying something much more positive.

"Never mind this bad stuff – look at the alternative. Look at what you are missing. Look at what you could be. Look at who you could be!"

John seems to be saying – *"You're going to get what you deserve!"*

And you can't say fairer than that.

But Jesus is saying, more controversially: *"You're going to get what you don't deserve!"*

You're going to discover, (if you have eyes to see), a God who does *not* treat you as you deserve but who loves you despite your mistakes and your failings and let-downs.

A God who wants to break through to you with a love that doesn't depend on how we measure up, that doesn't count the cost, that does not keep the score.

And ironically it's becoming aware of that love that gives us the motivation and the power to change ourselves

and to make more of our lives
through our thankfulness and gratitude to the God
whose love will never let us go.

This time of Advent is a time for us to look at ourselves and consider where we
might need to change – not out of dull duty – but so we can be the people God is
calling us to be.

This time of Advent is a time for us to reconsider the word “Repent.”
Repent means we turn to God.

Now that may include turning away from other stuff that holds us back or spoils
our lives, but the turning is a positive change for the better.

It’s becoming aware of the best version of you – and going for it.

It’s becoming aware of God’s great love - and responding to it.

It’s becoming aware that living God’s way leads to the best life of all - and not
wanting to miss out on that.

It’s becoming aware that Jesus really meant it when he said *“I have come to bring
life in all its fullness.”* (John 10:10)

John 1: 1-18

Mark 1:1-8 , 14-15

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