**Stowe Church December 4th**

**The message of John the Baptist**

This time of the year everyone seems to be a rush. Another plague these days is that everything needs to be done immediately. Emails must be answered now. Texts on phones, now. Our grandchildren are capable of holding a conversation and replying to texts at the same time.

 Thankfully God does not work like that, often He asks us just to wait.

So here we stand in Advent: a season where we wait and prepare.

A period of waiting and preparation for the celebration and wonder of the birth of Jesus and also as we wait and prepare for Jesus coming again. So let us have a look at the passage from Matthew which we have just had read and then see what that teaches us about waiting and preparing

Matthew writes as a Jew who has found in Jesus the fulfilment of all that is precious to him .Fulfilment is a key part of Matthew’s gospel. One of his favourite sayings is “that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets “He uses Old Testament quotes more than any other gospel writer.

Thirty years has passed since Matthew describes the events surrounding the birth of Jesus. Matthew was writing to a Christian community primarily made up to Jewish Christians hence his often referring back to the Old Testament Scriptures

Matthew ‘s description and lifestyle of John the Baptist a fearless preacher living in the wilderness has echoes of the great prophet Elijah and the prophecy found in the final verse the book of Malachi, the final book in the Old Testament, where a new Elijah is prophesied preparing the way for the Lord . Matthew also captures this in his quote from Isaiah “ A voice of one calling in the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord.” Matthew sees John as that voice and Jesus as the expected Lord.

We see from the passage how John was challenging and preparing the Israelites for the coming of Jesus. The first word he speaks are at the heart of his ministry (verse 2 )

**Repent**

The root meaning of “to repent” is “to turn” or to have a dramatic change of mind and direction. For John it was a heartfelt sorrow for sin and a commitment to forsake it and follow God’s ways. As John pointed out lives should then produce fruit in keeping with repentance. But when he saw the religious leaders joining his listeners he did not see that in their lives. We know from other passages that John was critical of the Pharisees for being legalistic and hypocritical, following the letter of the law rather than its true intent and the Sadducees for using religion for their own political purposes. You can hear his annoyance in what he said to them.

He calls them “brood of vipers” (verse 7)

He tells them to produce fruit consistent with repentance. Well, what does that mean? It means to demonstrate the true change in the heart and mind the way you live your life.

John then makes a remarkable statement ( verse 9).

He says to the religious leaders , “ . . . don’t presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones.”

Don’t think just because you are the children of Abraham, God’s chosen people, you have no need to repent. It is not enough to be children of Abraham in name only.

So John challenged all his hearers to repent. Why? Because the Kingdom of Heaven was near.

**The Kingdom of Heaven is near**

Only Matthew uses the phrase Kingdom of Heaven, the other gospel writers use Kingdom of God. Matthew is aware of his Jewish readers who out of reverence do not speak of God’s name directly, rather they use Lord.

So what is this Kingdom of Heaven?

It was not the kind of Kingdom the Israelites were expecting , their land with boundaries as in the time of King David . It was not a realm but a rule. It’s where the rule of God breaks into the hearts of His people to bring about a change of heart which leads to a change of mind and spills out into how they live their lives. The kingdom of God as we tend to refer to it began when Jesus stepped into human history and brought about a very different Kingdom, where he reigns in the hearts of all believers. It will be fully realised then Jesus comes again. So John was declaring that something very special was taking place as he pointed people to the coming Jesus

John sees Jesus as heralding in a new Kingdom

**John points to Jesus.**

Matthews’s gospel is sometimes referred to as the “Royal Gospel “because of the emphasis on Jesus as King. In the genealogy of Jesus in Chapter 1 Matthew shows that Jesus is in the line that goes back King David. In our Isaiah reading the Messiah is shown to come out of the line of Jesse, the father of King David. Here again we see Matthew linking the fulfilment of that prophecy.

So John begins to turn the focus of his listeners to Jesus.

**John points to Jesus**

He was pointing people not to Jesus’ birth, because Jesus is already an adult man at this time. He’s pointing people to the coming of Jesus who as they will come to realise will not be an earthly king rather a suffering servant, a ministering Messiah, a compassionate Christ, and a sacrificing Saviour.

John tells us three things about this coming Jesus here:

Jesus is more powerful than him ( verse 11).

There’s something different about John and everyone knows it. They travel out into the wilderness to see him. He draws crowds and many are baptised in response to his message. Yet, John tells the crowd someone more powerful than him is coming. Jesus will be really special.

John is not worthy to remove his sandals.

John sees his role of that of a humble and unworthy slave The lowliest slaves were the ones who took off the sandals of the master’s feet. John is not even worthy to do that.

Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

John baptized with water, but Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

As Jesus said just before His ascension

“John baptised you with water but in a few days you will be baptised in the Holy Spirit. You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon and you will be my witnesses

**So what does this passage say to us today.**

Advent is waiting with reflective preparation for the birth of Jesus and his second coming. It is a time to step aside from the rush of this world and pause. Pause to take stock of our lives in the light of the coming of Jesus. Here are a few thoughts from the passage to perhaps help us

Firstly we need to reflect about repentance. For John the Baptist this was key, the starting point. And this is the starting point as we reflect and take stock. Do we need to bring anything to the Lord and seek His forgiveness claiming that promise that the Lord who loves us will forgive when we turn to him in repentance. We can rest in the loving forgiveness of God

Which leads on to reflect on the fruit of repentance. We need to bear the fruit of repentance in our daily lives and John gives the example of a fruit tree. Why a fruit tree?

 In our passage from Isaiah he prophesies the coming messiah is like a tree whose branches the will bear fruit,

Jesus underlined this when in John Chapter 15 He declares himself as the true vine and says that to be a fruit bearing branch his followers must remain in Him. If we do not remain in Him we will not bear fruit

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians that if anyone is in Christ the new creation has come and the old has gone.

This is part of our journey to become more Christ like both in character and service. Paul in Galatians tells us the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness faithfulness, gentleness and self control.

John says, “Produce fruit consistent with repentance.”

If God’s truly changed our lives we must let it shine, let it shine by the way we live!

John then declared the kingdom of heaven or of God has entered this world. We are waiting to celebrate the wonder of the birth of Jesus, who came down to us to be our saviour. W can pause during Advent to grasp this amazing event and with the Shepherds praise God afresh for the birth of Jesus.

Finally John declared that he baptises with water for the repentance of sins but Jesus was going to baptise them with the Holy Spirit.

In our Isaiah passage he prophesied the coming messiah

The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—
    the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
    the Spirit of counsel and of might,
    the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord

When John baptised Jesus we are told the heavens opened and Spirit of God descended on Jesus to be with Him in His ministry on earth

Jesus promised us the Holy Spirit to enter our lives to be a supporter and guide in our journey of faith and to fill us with gifts and power to be witnesses to Jesus in all we say and do.

So as we wait and prepare we can reflect on:

Whether we need to take stock and reflect on what it means to repent

The need to think about it means for me to be a fruit bearing branch

Whether we need to open our lives more to the Holy Spirit

Can we just spend a few moments reflecting here in the quietness of this church and I will then close with an advent prayer

Father

As streets fill with shoppers
Bright lights and tempting offers
Christmas songs and children’s laughter
You lead us along a different path
To a desert river and a Prophetic voice
A call to repentance
A call to service
A call to immerse ourselves
In living water that will never run dry
A call to prepare a way in our own lives
For the Saviour of the world to enter in
To know the touch of tender mercy
And rest in your forgiving love. Amen