

Mark 1:1-8 John the Baptist

A teenage Jewish boy had just passed his driving test and inquired of his father as to when they could discuss his use of the car.

His father said he'd make a deal with his son,

"You bring your grades up from a C to a B, study your Bible a little and get your hair cut, then we'll talk about the car."

The boy thought about that for a moment, decided he'd settle for the offer and they agreed on it.

After about six weeks his father said, "Son, you've brought your grades up and I've observed that you have been studying your Bible but, I'm disappointed you haven't had your hair cut."

The boy said, "You know, Dad, I've been thinking about that and I've noticed in my studies of the Bible that Samson had long hair, John the Baptist had long hair, Moses had long hair and there's even strong evidence that Jesus had long hair."

"You're right" the dad replied "but did you also notice they all walked where ever they went?"

Intro

Today on the second Sunday of Advent we traditionally focus on John the Baptist and his hard message of preparation by the way of repentance. As we know John is a strange character, Jesus' cousin and son of Zechariah the priest and his wife Elizabeth. We don't

know much about John's early life but we do know that at some point he took himself off into the wilderness and lived a simple life feeding off the land. I guess John was seen as a bit of an odd character, a nonconformist, an eccentric, people certainly knew him from what he ate and the way he dressed and I'm sure he was one of those well-known community characters, like the ones we all recognise. In our reading this morning we are told many people from the province of Judea and Jerusalem went out to hear John. He's drawing big crowds, people are flocking to see John.

Thinking

That got me thinking. What is it that makes people flock to things? Well, only last week we saw huge crowds at the shops and supermarkets whilst people tried to grab a bargain on Black Friday. In not so many weeks a mix of previously incompatible people will huddle together in tight spaces to join in with Christmas services and sing carols together. And soon after, thousands will again queue in the cold to be the first in picking up yet another bargain in the January sales. In the New Year, local gyms will see a boon in new membership as the years previously abandoned treadmills go into overdrive and the books about the latest diet will be flying off the shelves. And that's not all, people flock to other things, like football matches, royal weddings, Olympic torch parades and

French bicycle races. What is it that inspires this kind of community action? It's normally a really big deal to get more than a few hundred people together at any one time, but when it happens it tends to be due to a complex mix of different things: good organisation, a real sense of passion, duty, ritual, personal reward and a community feel-good factor all play a part.

Big crowds

Out of all of those things we've just thought about, things which draw crowds, the big crowds, baptism and repentance don't feature at all, people wouldn't flock to repent of their past. So what was so attractive about John the Baptist and his message? We all know that sometimes people can be drawn by the appeal of strange celebrity outfits and weird diets, but it has to be more than bearskins and wild honey that was attracting the crowds. So what was it?

Well, for one thing, the Jewish people were steeped in a story of repentance, renewal and hope of their restoration. They understood the symbolism of baptism and what that meant for them both spiritually and culturally in the context of their own history and their minds were open to receive, and their ears were open to hearing the message again. We have to remember, that first century Palestine

was a political hotbed. The people are boiling with resentment against the Roman occupation, which was crippling them with unreasonable taxes. And as a result, we can sometimes feel the atmosphere of a potential uprising woven throughout the Gospels. We see this potential anger and violence almost breaking out when Jesus is brought before Pilate, so when people flocked out to hear John the Baptist, perhaps they were looking for a call to arms. But in John the Baptist they hear a different message.

Demanding

You could say that John the Baptist's message was as equally demanding as that of the Roman occupiers. It wasn't an easy message to hear, it made demands and placed expectations upon those who were willing to listen and respond. In Luke's version of the story, John insists that spiritual renewal must bear some practical fruit and he tells them they must share their food and clothes with the needy. This is definitely a hard message to hear, because Luke tells us the crowd is partly made up of those people who are causing the difficulties, Roman soldiers and tax collectors, all rubbing shoulders with the people they were cheating. They have gathered along side everybody else and I'm sure that must have caused some tension, but the things John was calling them to do, share their food and clothing, were social acts, acts of care,

kindness and compassion and they had a direct effect on the attitudes and perceptions of that diverse crowd. John's call for justice, peace and holiness to replace occupation, hatred and exploitation, looks very much like the kingdom of God.

The attraction of John the Baptist shows people are hungry for change, desperate for it, both personally and as a wider community. That message of social transformation fuelled by their own personal renewal was deeply compelling. It was a breath of fresh air in a community atmosphere which was choked with resentment. In amongst all of that we get people being baptised, a public act of an individual's commitment to real change. It seems like that was what Judea needed at that time, but John points out water is not enough to effect real change. All of his work was in preparation of the message Jesus would bring, a message of peace, justice, freedom and real change not just for Judea but for the whole world.

Listening

As I go around talking and listening to people, hearing their stories and finding out what's going on in their lives. At the moment I very much hear some of the echoes of that Judean community, the echoes of resentment and bitterness, the echoes of division, prejudice and intolerance. It's not difficult to see why those feelings

of resentment prevail. In times of difficulty, in times of hardship and austerity it is only natural for people to try and make sense of it all, to try and see what's going on. It's only natural for us to look round and try to apportion the blame, to try and work out who's at fault, to point the finger and to maybe single out people who are different to us. It's only natural for us to look for solutions to our problems in people who have positions of authority, to see what 'they' are going to do about it. And it's only natural for us to be drawn towards quick and easy solutions to the problems of our day. Why do we naturally do all of that in difficult times? Well, because it's easy....It's easy to blame someone else, it's easy to point the finger and highlight the differences, it's easy to look for quick and simple solutions, especially in the people who we think have the answers, and it's easy because it means we don't have to change ourselves.

Hard message

John the Baptist's message wasn't easy, it was hard. It was hard because he was calling for real personal change, a real change of attitudes and a change of heart. It was hard because he called people to repent for their selfish ways and for the way they mistreated others by thinking they were in the right. It was hard because baptism meant a public commitment to making those changes and in doing so they would also be held accountable by

the whole community. John the Baptist's message was hard because it wasn't just a message of "try and be a bit nicer to one another," it was that you had to turn around, change completely and be renewed before you will see any real change in your own lives and subsequently in your communities.

New Year

In a few weeks time in the New Year, crowds of people will begin to join in with traditional acts of renewal as think about the coming year. People will be checking their gym membership, thinking about a new job, moving house or simply trying to lose a few of those pounds put on with the Christmas cheer. John the Baptist's message was in preparation coming messiah, a message of renewal, it was a hard message to hear, but it had much more of an impact on that community of Judea. Ok it didn't start a revolution, but it was the beginning of something new, a new message of God's love and commitment to a struggling world.

What kind of difference would it make if we were to prepare ourselves to make a real commitment. A commitment to bringing about renewal and change, a commitment to bringing God's kingdom values to bear not just into our own lives, but also into the lives of our community and the world around us. The renewal of the

New Year is a great thing, but even more important, let's make sure we are ready to make that commitment to the kingdom, a commitment that has the kind of wider communal impact that John was calling for. We can't do it under our own steam, as John well knew. But we can do it with the story that is to come, the Good News. The great story of God's own commitment to this troubled world, the story of his appearing in flesh, born a refugee in a place which was not his home, his commitment to become human, a commitment to be one of us, so that God himself could understand what it is to be human and show his unending love for us all.

The story of Christmas is God's commitment to renewal, let's join in with that story by committing ourselves to renewal and in turn that may even be the catalyst to the renewal of our communities.