

“The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.
It is written in Isaiah the prophet:

"I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way"—

"a voice of one calling in the desert,

'Prepare the way for the Lord,

make straight paths for him.' " And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

“Prepare” - that is the message of John the Baptist and this second Sunday in Advent.

We are always preparing for something – we prepared ourselves at least on the outside to come here this morning – I don't see anyone in their pyjamas. Years ago people prepared themselves for church on Sundays by going to church on Saturday! These days we are lucky if we have gulped down some meusli let alone read the Sunday Mail before we get here! Anyone bringing a baby to church has to come prepared – prepared with food and toys, prepared for mess, prepared for embarrassment and stress! At home we spend more time preparing food than eating! We prepare to go away on holidays, we prepare for Christmas. Our teenagers are glad the time of preparing assignments and for exams is over for the year, and their teachers are happy there are no more reports to prepare. We are continually preparing our children for adult life in the world. And at the end of it all we all have to be prepared to die. That's something most of us put off thinking about until we have to.

How do we prepare for the end of life and to meet the God who is coming to us one way or another, either at death or when Jesus Christ appears for the second and final time? John the Baptist called people to prepare for Christ's first coming, he was "**a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord'**". but his call applies also to us as we prepare for his coming to us at Christmas and at the end of our lives or the end of time.

When the disciple Mark tells the Good News of the coming of Jesus Christ "**the beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God**" he does not begin with the love story between Mary and Joseph, or an angel whispering in Mary's ear about a baby, there are no angels singing to shepherds watching their flocks on a starry night. Mark begins with the voice of a rough diamond in the desert - John the Baptist calling people to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins. And surprisingly to us people left the professional priests in their ornate temple and traveled on dusty roads to the wilderness to hear this strange man dressed in camel's hair and living off of locusts and wild honey. Maybe it's not so strange. People are leaving churches today too to go and hear other voices. They want to hear something prophetic, something a bit on the edge, that might change their lives for good.

The desert seems like an odd place to hold a press conference announcing good news or have a church service. A dead place, where nobody lives, a hot exposed place. But the desert was also where Israel came to know God without distractions. The desert sometimes felt like a God-forsaken place where they grumbled against God but it was also where they learnt to depend on God and saw God's providing and care. They learnt to trust him there. It was a place where God met and spoke to them. The wilderness came to be a picture of the deadness of people's souls, their lostness, desolation, spiritual dryness, thirst hunger and longing, and of the distance from God in human hearts and lives. In the desert of life all you have is yourself and God, no distractions.

The other night was watching a program called Man v Nature about one was man dropped by helicopter into the Sahara desert. He showed you how you could survive if you knew where to look. In the desert John pointed to Christ as their hope for survival, saving help and life and direction.

Someone is coming, he said, someone greater than himself who would pour out God's life-giving spirit on them. Now was the time to get ready for him. And he offered these dry dusty souls a life changing washing

in the river Jordan, a baptism, for the forgiveness of their sins. They came out there in their dirty laundry - their sins and things they were ashamed of and they went home fresh, new inside, unburdened by their past and full of hope for the future as they waited for the Christ to come.

We often prepare things by washing them. Food, clothes, ourselves. The washing John offered people was a washing of forgiveness, a baptism of repentance which means change, turn-around, new direction. They came out of their new people, the past forgiven and left behind and a new life to live.

All this prepared them for Christ who was coming into the world to make it all possible.

The baptism John offered was only the beginning - it pointed to Jesus who would come into the world to die for it and cleanse it of everything sinful and unclean. The baptism Jesus would bring would not only pour water and forgiveness on us and but the Holy Spirit of God inside us, who would enable change and inner renewal to take place in us. **"I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."**

Isaac experienced that baptism this morning.

The Holy Spirit of God was poured out by God inside him as the water of forgiveness was poured on his head. He was given new life, relationship with God and a new power at work in him to live with and for God. Today marked a turning point in his life, a change of heart and direction. Like all of us he was born curved in on himself now he has been opened up to God and others. And empowered to do that.

Baptism is the best preparation for life because it tells us who we are and whose we are and where we are going. It promises a daily new start and a life time guarantee of God's forgiveness. Living in the grace and power of your baptism is the best preparation for the coming of Christ, for the end of life. The daily cycle of repentance and faith, admitting our sin, believing Christ died to forgive us and walking new because of who we are in him – keeps the focus of life where it needs to be, on Christ himself.

Some people say as they look back at their lives "I wouldn't change a thing". Most weeks there is a whole lot I wish I hadn't said or done or should have done! Repentance means a change is possible, not that you can undo the past but that you don't have to be burdened by it and keep living in it. When I drive up Brighton Rd I am often frustrated I am not allowed to do a U turn, unlike on Anzac Highway. Sometimes I am not game to try it, the traffic wont let me. I want to but I can't. But God allows and encourages us to do at least one "U" turn a day. He invites and encourages us to come back to him, turn around in repentance from anything that is nor right in our lives and in the power of his forgiveness start again.

If you have been a miserable old grump lately face it, seek God's forgiveness and start thinking under the influence of the Holy Spirit. If you have been living only for yourself, repent, be forgiven and start living for others with Christ's help. If you've become addicted to some sin in your life repent of it and seek Gods help to quit it. If you've neglected Bible reading and prayer at home don't just say "I know I should, but admit it, confess it and ask the Spirit to help you do something about it". If you have something against someone in your life don't just feel miserable and continue to blame them, seek forgiveness yourself, then forgive them and show that you have by doing something to restore the relationship. If your relationship with your husband or wife is not good repent, take God's forgiveness, swallow your pride and do something for Gods sake and your marriage's! If you haven't experienced the life change God offers called baptism then maybe now is a good time to consider it.

In December when we are often burnt out from the busy year yet still feel a pressure mounting to rush around getting jobs done and obeying the diary, thinking this is the way to prepare for Christmas. John calls us out into the desert to be alone with God, to be confronted, comforted and changed by God. He takes us back to our baptism where we rediscover who we are, why we are here and where we are going, where we find the washing of God's renewing forgiveness and the power to be different.

We have all sorts of daily preparation routines in our lives, and annually at Christmas.

But how are we preparing for eternal life the end of time, for the coming of God and our coming to him.

God baptizes us into relationship with him and into a new life with and for him.

Going back to it each day and living in its grace and power is the best preparation we could ever have to meet him when he comes. May God prepare you too for that day.