

There are many voices in the wilderness of the world. Several recent voices are appeals to do something about the potholes on our roads. Jesus will not be too concerned about them provided the way is straight. We need to be thoughtful about the potholes in our lives.

The four gospels all begin in different ways. Yet we could say it is the sudden arrival of John the Baptist that begins the story for the people of Judea. He is a voice, apparently out of nowhere, in the wilderness of Judea. We are told nothing about his background.

Matthew likens him to the voice that Isaiah the prophet spoke calling people to "prepare the way of the Lord." He is dressed in such cloths and eats food that reminds people of the great prophet Elijah. John, like many of his contemporaries, is looking forward to a Messiah of God. Now, he announces, the Messiah is coming.

We also look forward to the Messiah's return, to his coming again. We look forward to celebrating the birth of Jesus. The gospel today takes us back to the call to people to prepare for his first coming. The preparation at that time prepares us to prepare for both to celebrate his birth, and for his return in power and glory.

Matthew only gives us John's central message. "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near." It is also the central message of Jesus. We think of 'repent' as saying 'sorry'. We say sorry for many different reasons. Sometimes it is when we bump someone in a supermarket. It may be to some guests who come for dinner after realizing that we made a mistake in following the recipe. There is no great harm done. We know when we have done something very wrong. Perhaps it is a serious disagreement with someone; we have done an injustice, a serious wrong, we say 'sorry', but do we feel any sense of remorse?

A friend of mine was tricked into going to a quiet place and was attacked. The attackers included juveniles. The culprits were brought to justice. The younger ones were told to write a letter of apology. My friend read them and said, "they were just words." There was no sense of sorrow for what the offenders had done. There was no thought not to get involved with older thugs who were actually given six years behind bars.

Repentance involves a change in our lives. It comes from a sense of deep sorrow for some wrong.

That is probably the clue to the people going out to John the Baptist in the wilderness seeking baptism. They were aware of the need to change their way of life. Perhaps they went in ones and twos, or a group of five or six. We might imagine: Ben saw Jacob and asked him why he was so different. Jacob told him he had been down to the Jordan for baptism for the forgiveness of sin. Likewise, it would be fair to suggest, Ruth had a similar talk with Esther.

There were probably groups of people who came out to John. The people believed what a Psalm says, "I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord' and you forgave the guilt of my sin." (Psalm 32:5) When Ben, Jacob, Ruth, Esther went to the Jordan confessing their sins, they were cleansed in the washing. They felt relieved from the burden, the worry, their sense of wrong against God. The acceptance of baptism is a confession in itself. That is in part the teaching of Baptism for us.

It is not to say we must think we can now do as we like. John the Baptist was blunt when he spoke to the Pharisees and Sadducees. They were seen as people living religious lives. They were called to bear fruits that showed they lived as they said they would. Jesus had arguments with these groups. He was as radical as taking an axe to a diseased tree. Jesus at some point in his ministry spoke similar words John spoke today, "Do not presume to say, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor.'" They could not expect that was the way into the kingdom of God. I have met many people who say, "I'm an Anglican." Yet they do nothing about worship, prayer, genuine giving to God, and are choosy about what we won't think about their negative attitudes towards people of other cultures.

It is necessary we review our life and accept to change our way of presuming on God, or receiving God's grace without thought. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *The Cost of Discipleship* spoke about cheap and costly grace. "Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate." (p.36)

He continues, "Costly grace is the gospel which must be *sought* again and again, the gift which must be *asked* for, the door at which a man must *knock*." (p.37)

John the Baptist declared he baptized with 'water for repentance.' Some unnamed person was coming more powerful than himself, who would baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire. This was no new idea to the people. Their old prophets spoke of the day of wrath and of wind and fire bringing God's judgement on the nation. The people needed to be ready to meet the mightier one.

Matthew told us by recording the birth narrative, the 'unnamed mightier one' is Jesus. We believe he took our humanity so we may share in his divinity. He brought us God's forgiveness through his cross. It is not something we should take for granted but act in preparation to meet him on the straight, even if potholed road.

There are many voices speaking today that suggest the end is near. They are not always religious voices. Nor are they people dressed like John the Baptist. Such people would be considered to have mental health issues. Yet are any of those voices causing us to consider how we are prepared to give an account of ourselves when the Lord appears?

May the Lord when he comes, find us watching and waiting.