

SERMON – 15/12/24
'The Peers'

Mark 1:1-8

"And so John came, baptising in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." (Mark 1:4)

We began our Advent journey a fortnight ago thinking about the Legends and the lives of the heroes of our faith – those who lived by faith and who longed for a better country. Then last Sunday we thought about the Critics – the prophets who compared the nostalgic memories of the Legends with what they saw round about them in their own time and refused to sweep the shortcomings of the people under the carpet but instead held out a beautiful vision of what could be if God's people were to take God at His Word.

This morning we take that process into *our* present, taking time to look for the signs of the Kingdom amongst our Peers and asking ourselves what we each can do to contribute to what God would do in further building the Kingdom here and now as we seek Christ's coming among us.

We have read this morning of John the Baptist and his unconventional working style, preparing the way for the Lord and I'd like to suggest to you that we find in John a challenging role-model for us today as we seek the coming of the Kingdom in our day and in our place. There are a lot of similarities between first century Palestine and our own generation, and since John had a very fruitful ministry in his day, perhaps there are lessons for us to learn from his example.

The people of Judea 2000 years ago were restless. They were very proud of their heritage but they were under Roman occupation and very conscious of their powerlessness to be all that they might be. And many people today are restless in the same kind of way. There is an increasing frustration at the way global forces hold sway over so much of our lives. The multinational supermarket chains determine what we eat and how much we pay producers for their produce; faceless bureaucrats make the rules, the path to an increasingly secular direction in

our society seems to be laid down from on high, driven by an all-powerful media, and many feel powerless to do anything about it.

At the time of Jesus there was a frustration with organised religion and a desire to find a really meaningful way to deal with the joys and sorrows of life, a way to get beyond the burdens that weighed people down, to fulfil the longing they had for things eternal. And I perceive something very similar in society today – the many empty seats in churches, and the derision that often greets comments made by Christians in public debate, bear witness to the way in which organised religion is perceived in our time, and yet a growing interest in things “spiritual” in the broadest sense of that word, suggests to me that many apparently secular people *are* looking for ways to express their joys and find comfort in their sorrows, and people *are* yearning for something, something (they know not what) that is beyond the everyday.

Now, onto the stage of 1st Century Judea, a stage that was set with almost universal dissatisfaction and yet with widespread hopes, walked this man John. But although he was to be one of the chief players in the drama that was to unfold, he didn’t stride onto centre-stage to deliver his address – in fact, it couldn’t have been more different. He didn’t even come on to the stage at all – far from Jerusalem the city of David’s throne, far from the Temple where day and night the priests and Levites of Israel made offerings of worship and sacrifice, John, we’re told, came baptising in the desert region and preaching repentance. Tapping into where popular culture was at, John offered a way that was radically different from the religion of the Temple, a fresh expression of Church, you might say – shockingly so, as far as the religious establishment was concerned. He went way beyond what was perceived to be the normal, and the result was (as Mark tells us here) that ‘the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him.’ Folk went out of their way, miles from home into one of the most inhospitable places, hot and dry, to hear this dishevelled and probably rather smelly man tell them that they needed to change their ways and turn back to God. What was going on?

What was John doing there? First of all, he was not what you might expect of a man of God – he didn't look like the Pharisees and the Sadducees, the familiar religious figures of the day – and he wasn't to be found in the normal religious places – the Temple or the synagogues. He wore clothing made of camel hair with a leather belt round his waist and he ate locusts and wild honey, living out in the desert amongst the wild animals and bandits, away from the normal places of pilgrimage. And maybe we too need to think about proclaiming our message where it is least expected. If folk expect to hear the Christian message anywhere, it is safely in places like this – the churches and chapels and cathedrals and mission halls of our land – where people sit quietly and listen, where there is peace to concentrate and where only very occasionally will someone dare to stand up and take issue with what the preacher is saying. Sometimes this one or that one, seeking meaning in life or answers to their fears will slip in to a place like this in search of a touch from God. I dare say they did that in 1st Century Palestine too – people knew where the Temple was, they knew that there was a synagogue round the corner. But maybe we have to take a leaf from John the Baptist's book and take the message out from here to the unexpected places and the dangerous places. People aren't expecting to encounter the love of God and the Good News of Jesus on the highways and byways, at the mother and toddlers group or at the farmer's market or playing board games, in public debates on the issues of the day, in the pubs and clubs of our land – we don't have a captive audience there and folk can just walk away if they like – but yet again, it seems to me that a faith that is not restricted to a comfortable stained-glass atmosphere finds a powerful precedent in the Gospels and one that we ignore at our peril. I'm glad to say that in such things as the Seeds for Growth Fund the Church of Scotland is backing imaginative and innovative new ways of being church in our land and we have the opportunity to do our part in the new Kinross-shire Parish as we consider how to share the Gospel not only in the worship centres that will remain but in the communities that will no longer have a church building in their midst and amongst the generations who will probably never engage with an ecclesiastical model that has been in decline for 70 years.

Secondly, we find John the Baptist to be one who preaches an uncompromising message. 'After me will come One more powerful than I.' The King from heaven is coming, therefore the Kingdom of Heaven is near, therefore things are going to have to change. "Repent," says John. That is "turn around," "turn back to God," "get in step." When the crowds flock into the desert to hear this wild man preach, he doesn't smooch them with comforting words, but speaks to them about their sin and about the coming judgement of God – not amongst the top ten subjects we preachers like to tackle for fear of offending our listeners. But John doesn't hold back, and far from driving people away, they come in their droves, falling on their knees, confessing their sin and seeking God's forgiveness. We are under huge pressure today from society to keep our message neutral and inoffensive; we are under pressure from within the church not to rock the boat too much in case anyone we have on board already decides that it is not for them any more. Yet here John's example seems to be exhorting us to speak out boldly and uncompromisingly about the reality of heavenly judgement to come, about the need for repentance, about the folly of building our hope on nostalgia and tradition alone. That is a challenging message for folk like me who may be tempted to make the Gospel message as easy to listen to as I can, but it's something we *all* need to take on board in our attempts to encourage others along the way of faith. Don't let's be tempted to water down the essentials of the Gospel – let's tell it as it is, and let God give the increase.

Finally, we find John pointing away from Himself. And this example, it seems to me, is John's most profound legacy to us. "After me will come One more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptise you with water, but He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit." Or in words that are given us elsewhere in the Gospels, "Christ must become greater; I must become less." (John 3:30) How easily we get caught up in what the Church is doing – *our* activities, *our* meetings, *our* projects – and much of it is good and enjoyable, necessary and fruitful, an expression of our commitment to Christ. But how easily we begin to advertise ourselves, we highlight our heritage, we devote our energies to promoting our services and our organisations, and preserving our

buildings. And to what end? What are we doing here? When will we realise that for all our efforts our only lasting memorial will be the extent to which we have exalted Christ – not the money we have raised, not the buildings we have erected, not the traditions we have maintained nor the innovations we have introduced, but only ultimately the pointers we have given to our Lord and Saviour.

As a church, as a congregation, what are we doing here? As we prepare again for our Christmas celebrations, amidst all the anxieties, the hopes and the expectations of this season of the year, may our eyes be fixed on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, and on what He has done for us through His death and resurrection. And as we go from here to the tasks that await us amongst our peers during this incoming week, may our mouths be filled with His Word; may our lives shine with His light; may He become greater and we become less. May we prepare the way for the Lord and make straight paths for Him, and may those around us experience the reality of the Kingdom of God and discover the way to the very heart of Christmas, the living Lord Jesus Christ Himself.