

Lord Jesus, as we contemplate your word, come into our hearts in judgement and mercy and, by the power of your Spirit, set to rights our crooked view of life. Amen.

- “Get repentance done!”
- OK, so imagine you are a modern day John the Baptist, come to preach repentance. You want to draw the crowds like he did. Where would you begin your preaching?
 - Outside the houses of Parliament? Perhaps in the middle of Milton Keynes shopping centre where thousands throng every day? Maybe in a large church with a big congregation so you can preach to people who want to hear?
 - John the Baptist went out to ‘*the wilderness of Judaea*’, the desert, away from the crowds. Does that mean we need to head off to the depths of Fenland Lincolnshire or right to the borders, to the hills of Northumberland for our John the Baptist style preaching to “Get repentance done!”
- I want to suggest, as a bit of a follow on from last week’s Festival of carols sermon, that actually the true wilderness today is being in the middle of society rather than escaping it, and that that is where God is calling us to be.
 - John the Baptist was preaching in a bleak time for the nation of Israel.
 - The might of Rome forcing people into subservience on pain of violence and death
 - Mass poverty and degradation throughout the country
 - An increased dissatisfaction with the way things were and frequent attempts at coups by tin-pot Jewish hopefuls
 - The ever present threat of reprisals by the Romans
 - Do you think we live in such a bleak time in Britain in the 21st Century?
 - In a society with more opportunities than ever before we have become remarkably self-centred. The gap between rich and poor is getting wider rather than narrowing.
 - In a world where personalities of leaders are becoming ever more important we seem to be electing the more extreme rather than the more stable. Is this deception by those standing for election or a hankering after change by people who are always wanting ‘more’?
 - In a first-world where we are able to live more comfortable lives than ever before there is more depression and mental illness than has ever previously been recognized.
 - It is difficult to deny that for anyone who looks beyond the boundary of their own tiny world, these are bleak times indeed.
- So where is the wilderness in 2019, so very different yet so very similar to 30AD.
- I think wilderness is wherever the Spirit of Christ finds it hard to flourish
 - Is it in the callous politician mouthing faith but with rather different priorities?
 - Is it in the homeless stranger seeking solace in a cheap bottle of cider with a background in computer programming who writes poetry when sober?
 - Is it in the distressed teenager, so impervious on the outside but so frightened and full of self-loathing within?
 - Is it in the lonely pensioner who has such warm memories of how life used to be but who doesn’t know their next door neighbour now that the new couple next door both work so many hours of the day?
 - Is it where you are today? Sitting so respectably in your pew but carrying a burden that is concealed?
- Do you feel ‘on the edge’ rather than in the middle of everything? Or are you so much in the middle that you can’t see the wood for the trees? I think this is what wilderness is all about.
 - If you identify with this, then John the Baptist is coming to you so that you can “Get repentance done!”
- And Jesus, to whom he points, sees through all the camouflage we put in his way. For the prophecy from Isaiah says of him in rather well known words, ‘*He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear*’.

- Jesus will not look on the surface where everything seems so often rosy and bright because we have not let our guard down. Jesus looks at the human being beneath, warts and wounds and all. The wilderness of so many human beings in their need.
- And remember that not only those who knew they were needy went out to the wilderness to meet John the Baptist. Also came the respectable Jewish religious people of the day. *‘when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them ...’*. So if you are here today feeling secure because you don’t actually identify with any of the groups I have mentioned so far and life for you is not in the least bleak, here a word of judgemental caution and listen to what John the Baptist did say to the respectable religious 2000 years ago, *“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruit worthy of repentance.*
- “Get repentance done!”
- What does it mean to repent? Is it just about feeling wretched because we are suddenly aware of all the awful things we’ve said, all the dreadful mistakes we’ve made?
 - Actually the word used for ‘repent’ in the bible means literally to turn around, to face in a new direction. To turn back to God
 - To turn away from the destructive self-obsessed desires to do what we want, and to face God, and to attempt to discern what he wants
- And what John says is that the only real way to judge a person’s repentance or not is whether they *‘Bear fruit worthy of repentance.’* So it’s not so much about not doing sinful things, for after all, you and I are human beings and it is only God who does not sin. Rather it’s more about what positive, intrinsically good things we do. What good works we perform. The Pharisees strove really hard to keep the rules, in fact so hard that they had no time or headspace to share God’s love. They were so busy being disapproving of the sin of others, that they forgot to welcome the stranger and comfort the afflicted. Although they had come out to the wilderness, they had not admitted that their whole lives were pretty barren.
- John offers a chance to repent, to turn and face the one who is coming soon, Jesus Christ
- Jesus offers a way to allow the wilderness to flourish and allow green shoots to sprout and blossom. For the more we try to do this by ourselves, facing away from Jesus the more we are doomed to failure. John says one is coming who *‘will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.’* Drinking of the water of life and receiving the Holy Spirit through baptism will not make you sinless, but it may allow you to bear good *‘fruit worthy of repentance’*. If you are in any doubt of this, just look at the statistics. In just about any charitable altruistic activity there will be a far higher proportion of churchgoers than is represented in society as a whole.
- But this is Advent. A time of preparation and expectation.
 - The idea of Jesus returning to judge this unequal and unjust world, to restore the balance between creation and humanity, to remove dictators and despots and to come as the true King of all creation sounds rather attractive. Wars would cease. Starvation would cease. Refugees would be a thing of the past, *‘for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.’*
 - However the idea of Jesus returning to judge our own lives is rather more worrying, for *‘His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.’*
- So are you wheat or are you chaff? And how do you know? For the Pharisees and Sadducees thought they were wheat, but John declared otherwise. *‘You brood of vipers!’*
- Do you think of yourself as in the wilderness?
- Have you repented and turned to Christ?
- Are you bearing fruit worthy of repentance?
- This Advent is an opportunity to consider whether you are allowing the Holy Spirit to let you look deeper than what your eyes see, or your ears hear to see things as Jesus, the loving compassionate judge sees them.
- And that may help you to see in what areas Jesus is nudging you to change, to repent, in what areas he is rejoicing in your fruit and where he is leading you next. Amen.