
Advent 2. What of Sin?

Sermon • Rev'd Andrew Hoggan • 7 December

Isaiah 6:1-7 • Matthew 3:1-12



Isaiah 6:1-7, Matt 3:1-12 Advent week two. Revd. A. Hoggan
Let's Pray, Lord Jesus, open our hearts and minds to receive what you want to teach us from your word, amen.

By way of intro I want to very briefly recap last week where I used a passage in Revelation to accompany the gospel reading in Matthew 24 that has as it's emphasis watching, and being ready to meet Jesus when he returns on the final and glorious day.

In Revelation ch 1 John has a vision of Jesus. It's so awesome and overpowering that John falls to the ground as though dead. I highlighted what came next. "When I saw him I fell down at his feet as though dead but he placed his right hand on me saying do not be afraid."

If you can picture the scene Jesus would have to bend down to put his hand on John. It's a picture of pastoral care and encouragement. Very much needed in the context of Jesus being seen for who he is, and something of what it will be like when he returns.

So Advent Week One: Watch and wait in readiness. With the encouragement that if we know Jesus, there is no need for fear. If we know Jesus we will be in the right group when the separation that that is spoken of in Ch 24 takes place. "Two will be in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left. Two woman will be grinding meal together; one will be taken, and one will be left."

Advent Week Two: And both our passages this morning point to a key part of the answer in regards our readiness to meet Jesus now and on the great and glorious day when he returns. .

Put simply. What makes a person ready to meet Jesus? When our sin has been dealt with.

Let me approach the topic in this way. Church attendance is on the decline in many parts of the world. One of the answers that some think will turn things around is to avoid offending anyone. Sometimes, that results in people being a bit nervous when it comes to the matter of addressing the sinfulness of humanity and the judgement of God.

Case in point. That great modern hymn by Stuart Townend “In Christ Alone

“Till on that cross as Jesus died,
the wrath of God was satisfied.
For every sin was on him laid.
Here in the death of Christ I live.”

At a large and evangelical church, that has a great history of biblical preaching, and does many wonderful things in the community, I noticed one day when singing “In Christ Alone” that the word “wrath” had been changed to the word plan.

I sat on it for about six months. I like to think about things before making a fuss. Then I asked the pastor why the word “wrath” had been changed to the word “plan”?

He hadn’t noticed. Someone had taken it upon themselves to change the word. That a worry because the change in wording changes the theology of the song. The change avoids what’s called substitutional atonement. It sounds complicated but it’s not.

It means that Jesus takes upon himself the sin we deserve. Further, God’s righteous wrath and anger is directed **against the sin** the Son carries.

Substitutional atonement. Jesus takes our place. He is our substitute. We are then **“at one”** with God. **“Atonement”** **“at one” ment**. That may help us grasp how it works.

Think of Jesus in the garden just before his arrest. Jesus prays in great anguish. “My Father, if it is possible, let “this cup” pass for me; yet not what I want, but what you want.”

That cup was the cup of God's wrath. And so traumatic was the thought of it that Jesus literally sweated what looked like blood as the capillaries in his forehead ruptured. That can apparently happen if the stress and anxiety level is high enough.

As Jesus in prayer contemplated what the cross would mean his body manifest something of what he was going through. Let me say that an adequate understanding of the trinity, and the fact that the Father suffers **with** the Son, that understanding takes away one of the prime reasons that substitutional atonement has fallen out of favour.

A thin understanding of the Trinity, perhaps thinking that God the Father is punishing the Son, and not sin, had resulted in some rejecting the doctrine of substitutional Atonement.

We sing "In Christ Alone" as it needs to be sung, which means what we are singing makes theological sense.

Till on that cross as Jesus died,
the wrath of God was satisfied.
For every sin was on him laid.
Here in the death of Christ I live."

The gospel is the most encouraging and good news message conceivable. But it is not rainbows and unicorns. It is a realistic, warts and all depiction of humanity. More, it's prime purpose is to reveal the nature and character of the God who loves us, and the the God who has saved us.

It's been said the good news of the gospel is not good news till you know the bad news. The bad news of the gospel is that we are sinners who without the work of the cross, face the judgment of our sins, and the wrath of God.

In the six chapter of Isaiah, Isaiah gets a vision of God. Holy majestic, terrifying. One thing becomes very clear to Isaiah. There was a real difference between God and himself.

"Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts. If the passage stopped there, it would not be good news. But it doesn't stop there.

"Then one of the seraphs flew to me holding a live coal that had been

taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said, “ now that this has touched your lips your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out”

That live coal was a symbol of atonement. That through the work of God, ultimately accomplished in Christ, though foreshadowed in the sacrificial system, Isaiah’s sin is dealt with.

Isaiah the prophet is now cleansed and commissioned to speak on behalf of the High and Holy one.

Fast forward 700 years. Another is speaking for God. The last and greatest of the OT prophets, a kind of second Elijah, as shown by his clothing and lifestyle. John the Baptist is preparing people to meet with Jesus, “the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.”

JB message was simple. “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near”. “Turn towards Jesus and get real with who you are” might be a helpful way to sum up the essence of repentance and confession.

What to do in our culture that is not so keen on the idea we are sinners?

We could note that Jesus was pretty gentle with repentant sinners. Not so much with self righteous folk.

We could also acknowledge that while we can’t change the message, we can change the way we try to get it across.

Sometimes we get a bit focused on how we do things in church. Traditional practices can sometimes be seen as the “proper” way to do things.

Funny story. When organs were first used in worship it was scandalous. The organ was seen as sensual, shameless, pagan even, given it had originally been used in Roman circuses.

It took about 1000 years to become acceptable. Then 5-600 years later the reformers, and particularly the puritans, see the organ again as too closely associated with the world. The “devil’s bagpipe” they called it.

Fast forward another 500 or so years and today the organ is synonymous with church worship.

The point? Things fall in and out of favour. It doesn’t so much matter how we do things to get the message across. The main thing is we don’t change the message to accommodate to cultural trends or norms.

The Pharisees and Sadducees are so traditional, so steeped in the past, so tied to the law and the temple, that they fail to recognise the messiah and they don't understand the gospel.

Let's look a little at John's reaction as this great multitude of Pharisees and Sadducees turn up. You brood of vipers. Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance.

Hardly a warm welcome. Imagine a greeter at our door. You miscreant. Who told you you can come to church? Go sort your life out. Probably in a shouty voice too because JB was that kind of guy.

The English text can be a bit misleading sometimes. It's helpful to have a couple good translations to compare and contrast when something comes up in scripture that seems a bit puzzling or uncalled for.

In our reading Vs 7 has the religious leaders coming "for" baptism. The Greek has them coming "to" the baptism not "for" baptism.

While the NRSV is probably one of the best translations we can use, the NIV is better here. "but when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming **"to where"** he was baptising he said to them "you brood of vipers who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

There may well have been some religious leaders who were genuinely interested in JB message. There may have been some who were there out of curiosity. More likely, the majority were there to scope out the opposition. "You brood of vipers. Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come. Bear fruit worthy of repentance.

"Vipers are deadly snakes. Set a field on fire and you would find them slithering out of danger which makes the use of the word vipers somewhat fitting given the fire mentioned in vs 10 & 12 is linked with judgment.

And given these religious leaders would more than likely be relying on their status Vs 9-10 clarifies that.

"Do not presume to say to yourselves we have Abraham as our ancestor. I tell you God is able for these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bare good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

There are several ways folk think it is possible to get right with God. And it was certainly true that the religious leaders thought that could rely on

their tradition, their pedigree, their piety and rule keeping? Good fruit was the litmus test of a relationship with God according to John.

Let's make an application. There are two kinds of fruit we should think about as followers of Jesus.

One is the fruit of the spirit. The character traits of Jesus. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control.

The other kind of fruit is new believers.

The last few years I have greatly enjoyed my passion fruit vine that has produced hundreds of fruit. Even with giving them away I would sometimes eat 5 or so for breakfast, taking great satisfaction that in the supermarket they were \$5 each. This year? Nothing! I googled how long the vine produces fruit and disappointingly, 3-5 years.

Suffice to say if I have a vine solely for the purpose of giving me passion fruit, no fruit, means it's days are numbered. I have a president. Jesus talks about trees that don't bear fruit and what needs to be done with them.

If you go past my front yard, where there was a 10 Mtr long and 2 Mtr high vine there is just a stalk sticking out of the ground

JB was tough on the religious leaders.

Firstly, because for some of them at least, they were keeping rules, not keeping company with God.

Secondly, their misunderstanding of the gospel meant they failed to recognise Christ as the answer to the sinfulness of humanity.

Worse, it wasn't just that these religious leaders were fruitless trees. What they believed and taught was like a disease that could effect the health of the tree.

A viper is a deadly snake. Maybe John is thinking about another deadly snake that kind of stuffed things up as recorded in Genesis. Misrepresenting God. Getting us to look at ourselves rather than our creator.

Lastly, what does John say about Jesus?

It reinforces why it is we need to be ready. He talks about the two baptisms. John's baptism takes care of the outside. Jesus baptism will take care of the inside.

He talks of water and fire. Cleansing and judgment. We note though that the baptism of Jesus where John talks about the Holy Spirit and fire, fire takes on a positive dynamic as shown at Pentecost.

What of this talk of the “winnowing fork and fire” that ends our passage?

The winnowing fork is an instrument that separates chaff and wheat. You throw everything in the air and the wheat which is heavier falls to the ground. The chaff, or the unproductive part of the plant blows to the side. It is then gathered and burned.

Taking into consideration that the symbolism involved in the language is not to be taken literally, the point is clear. Separation and judgement are tied to the return of Jesus.

As it was in the passage we looked at last week in Matthew 24 where Jesus emphasizes the need to be ready and watchful in regards his return. Two women will be working in a field one will be taken and one will be left.

Jesus is our saviour. Absolutely. But we have to take seriously that a winnowing fork is an instrument of separation. And Jesus holds the winnowing fork. Jesus is also the one that burns the chaff.

Salvation and judgement at that great separation is the point. If we don't know Jesus is saviour we will know him as judge.

However, keep in mind that awesome and encouraging vision that John the Apostle had of Jesus in Revelation 1. “When I saw him I fell down at his feet as though dead but he placed his right hand on me saying do not be afraid.” John and Jesus knew each other.

If we know Jesus we are ready.

If we keep short accounts with God by confessing our sins, as we need to, we are ready.

And we will be fruitful in as far as exhibiting the character of Christ. The fruit of the Spirit. And that my friends will greatly help us as we seek the other kind of fruit Jesus expects of us. Our role in bringing people to Christ.

Avoiding talking about sin will never grow the church.

The heart of the gospel is the good news that God loves us. God loves us so much the he saved us from the power of sin, and the punishment for

sin, through the work of the cross.

Let's pray, Lord Jesus, help us keep close to you this day, knowing all the while that one day we will see you as you are, and that will be a very good day indeed, amen.