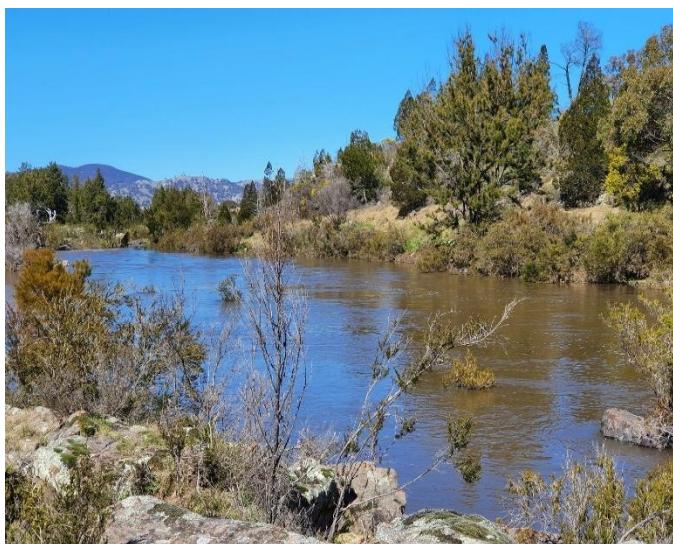


SERMON: Walking With Our Lord - Matthew 3:1-12

Dear Lord, may we find peace as your merciful, loving judgement brings us ever closer to you. Amen.

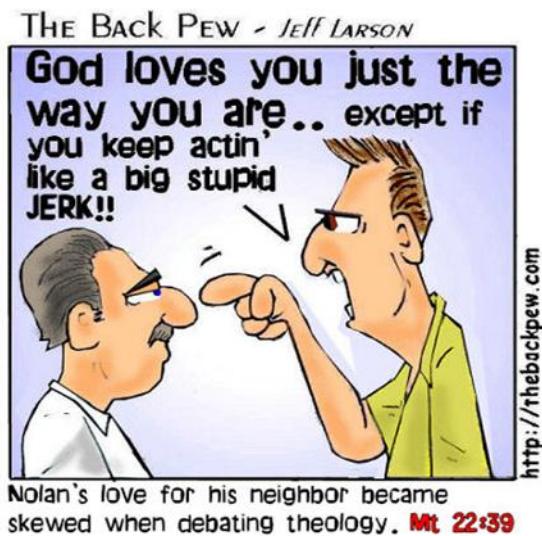
As our opening liturgy explained, the Second Advent candle symbolises the Peace of God. Our Old Testament readings certainly speak into this theme. Psalm 72 has King Solomon praying for a peace which goes way beyond that which could possibly be achieved by any earthly king. Isaiah paints the most beautiful picture of a peaceful creation where even the wolf shall live with the lamb and the leopard lie down with the goat kid.

Do you have a special place in creation where you go to find peace? [ppt 1: Cotter River photo; ppt 2 Fremantle beach sunset]



And yet within them and our gospel text there is also another key message. On the face of it this message is anything but peaceful: it is one of judgement.

The very word “judgement” can make us cringe. [ppt3 – Larson Cartoon]



Nobody likes being judged by someone else. Afterall, how dare they criticise me when they're far from perfect themself! And that's the thing, isn't it? – none of us are perfect, even if we may sometimes act like we are! And I suggest that's why the bible tells us that we don't have the authority to judge one another. That rests solely with our perfect Creator, our Father, because His motive is pure. As Matthew 5.48 tells us, He desires only that we grow into perfection with Him. He longs for us to be close to Him and he knows that for us to achieve that we need to choose to turn back to Him. So in addressing this issue I will place the concept of judgement in that light. I will focus on the heart of God's judgement by posing the question: “What could it take for us mere humans to walk perfectly with God on this earth?

Matthew 3. 1-12: John the Baptist

In our gospel reading John the Baptist opens with the words: “Repent, for the Kingdom of God has come near.” These are the very same words that Jesus himself speaks when not long after this event, He begins his public ministry.

The Greek word “repent” literally means to think differently after a change of mind. It reflects the Hebrew concepts of “to return” and “to be sorry, relent”. Prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel called Israel to turn back to the LORD, anticipating that those believers, by making that choice, would be dramatically changed within themselves. John the Baptist stands squarely in that prophetic stream.

Have you experienced the power of repentance in your life? I grew up within a very small family grouping. The only aunty I knew on my father's side was his unmarried sister Connie and we were close. In my early twenties I made a choice of which Connie greatly disapproved. She literally cut me out of her life. She wouldn't take my calls or allow me to visit her. It hurt. And even when I realised I'd made a mistake and corrected it, she still wouldn't reconnect.

Twenty years later out of the blue one Christmas I received a card from Connie with a substantial sum of money. I called to thank her and it was as if the past twenty years hadn't happened. For Connie, she was finally able to relent and let go of her past grievance. The card and gift was her way of saying sorry. For me, I could have held onto my hurt but thankfully I was able to forgive her and so we became close once again. When she died many years later I had the privilege of delivering her eulogy.

The ability to think differently about something and to turn back and to say sorry to someone is so powerful. It can completely transform our life. It is to this type of transformation to which we open ourselves, when we repent to our Heavenly Father. You may ask what have I to repent to God for? After all, I've followed the 10 Commandments all my life and done nothing wrong.

Let me frame it this way. Both John the Baptist and Jesus proclaim that the kingdom of heaven has come upon the earth. And this kingdom is all about our relationship with our Heavenly Father. From the beginning of creation to the coming of Christ and His ultimate return, our Father has worked and continues to work, tirelessly to rebuild His loving relationship with us. No matter how many times people have turned away from God, He has constantly reached out to us, his lost children. I know in my own life there are many times when I choose not to connect with my Heavenly Father. He wants me to walk closely with Him every single day but I get distracted by all the worldly things around me. It's for this I am called to repent. It's for choosing to prioritise other things over my relationship with my Heavenly Dad. It's for this reason that sometimes our Father, like any good parent, will discipline us. He will let us know that we're making the wrong choices. He will judge us with justice and mercy. This judgement is borne from His unceasing, steadfast love for each and everyone of his children. Rather than being afraid of it, judgement can be held as an action of love that helps us to walk closer with Him. The irony is that it is through His judgement that we can be at peace with God. Think of the times when we've known that we're doing something wrong but we just couldn't admit it to anyone. Remember the anxiety that created. Then imagine the relief we feel when someone calls out our folly. It's finally out in the open and we can learn from our mistake. We can grow. That's how I see God's judgement – He calls

out our bad choices so we can face them and grow closer to Him. And as we come closer we experience a deeper kind of peace that nothing else in the world can provide.

God's Kingdom and Baptism

Let us now consider the relationship between God's kingdom arriving and baptism. John the Baptist was preparing the way for the Lord but were the people ready to receive Him? For hundreds of years, ever since Isaiah, Israel had lived in expectation of God's healing and forgiveness. And now John is saying it's about to happen! The king is coming back- get ready for His kingdom!

Tom Wright explains: "*The prophets had said that God would come back when the people repented, turning to Him with all their hearts. That was what John summoned them to do; and they came in their droves. They came for baptism.*"

[ppt 4: John baptising in River Jordan]



As verses 4 to 6 in Matthew 3 describe, John used the rite of water baptism in the sacred River Jordan to enable people to confess their sins. This was a tangible sign that God was once again doing a new thing in history, for Israel and the world. Over a thousand years before God had led them across that river to conquer the promised Land and now they were to enter the Jordan again to get ready, as Wright puts it, "*for a greater conquest, God's defeat of all evil and the establishment of His kingdom on earth as in heaven.*"

Given its significance, it is little wonder that this baptism is not to be taken lightly. Verses 7 to 10 has John rebuking the Pharisees and Sadducees that had turned up to be baptised. These spiritual leaders taught the Jewish people that they could rely on the merit of Abraham, as the father of their faith. They believed that no matter what they did, they would be alright in the end because God had promised Abraham that it would be so. John puts them straight in no uncertain terms: *“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.”*

The message is clear. Going through the motions of baptism is not enough. Real repentance means we behave differently; we have a change of mind that is evidenced by the way we live our lives, that is witnessed to by the fruit we bear from our actions. One of these fruits is, I suggest, humility. It is this quality John portrays when in verses 11 and 12 he honours Jesus. The one who is to come is not only more powerful than John but will baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire. On the Day of Pentecost this promise was fulfilled. Ever since followers of Jesus have been graciously given the power of this baptism.

John then describes how the coming Messiah will mercifully and justly bring God's judgement. He uses the same imagery that Jesus himself uses later in his ministry: he will sort the chaff from the wheat. Once again, I suggest that this is a judgement not to be feared. It is an encouragement for us to honestly appraise how close our relationship is with our Lord and Saviour. In conclusion, as you consider your connection with God during this Advent Season, I invite us reflect on these questions:

- What are the fruits of repentance in our life?
- How can we best prepare for the coming of our Lord?
- How do we experience God's judgement in our life?
- And finally the question with which I began this sermon : What could it take for us mere humans to walk perfectly with God on this earth? While not answering this question directly, I suggest that this text from Matthew provides two importance practices that guide us to connect deeply with our Lord: Our meaningful repentance and His peace-giving judgement.

Let me finish in prayer.

Beloved Heavenly Father, we give you the thanks and praise for your steadfast love. As we tread upon your kingdom on earth, may we walk ever closer to you. Amen