

Sermons at the Anglican Church of Luxembourg

Fruit in keeping with repentance

Text: Luke 3:1-20

“Put your money where your mouth is”, is probably one of the less attractive sayings in the English language

More tasteful is “the proof of the pudding is in the eating” or the American English “Walk the talk..”

All are saying that good intentions can't stay that – they need to find concrete and practical expression that others can see and judge

Not exactly a pithy saying, but still on this theme are some words of Zwingli, a leader of the Reformation in Switzerland: our confidence in Christ does not make us lazy, negligent or careless, but on the contrary it awakens us, urges us on, and makes us active in living righteous lives and doing good.

For pithiness though, John the Baptist has it: Repent!

READ 3:3

In grk, the original written language of the NT it is *metanoia* – a change of mind

John, as a good Jew, would have a wider meaning – to turn, a change in lifestyle, in an obvious and visible way

John probably wasn't the sort of man you'd want to end up standing next to on a crowded bus – the sort that wants to engage you in loudly in conversation

Everyone goes quiet, apparently deeply engrossed in their newspapers, but really straining to hear every word – direct questions from John, evasive answers from you

Strangely dressed with a lifestyle to go with it he's concerned about your destination: where? You don't want to go there. You want to go here! You're on the wrong bus, heading the wrong way!

And deep down you know it's true! You realize that the landmarks show you are heading the wrong way. But the hassle of picking up your bags, elbowing your way to the door at the next stop. The embarrassment of being seen to listen to this man, of admitting you're going the wrong way – getting off, crossing the road and getting on a bus in the opposite direction feels too great.

But so is ending up at the wrong destination

The message of John, as in AD 30 he announces the arrival of Messiah, as he rolls out the red carpet, shouts to turn around involves as concrete actions as getting off a bus going one way and getting on another going the opposite way

The language Luke, the gospel writer uses, to describe John's task is borrowed from the OT prophet Isaiah from C5 BC

READ 3:4-6

It is a recycled prophecy – originally a word picture of the way God will smooth and prepare the way for his people back to Jerusalem from Exile in Babylon

It was as if he prepared things by smoothing down the hills and filling in the valleys to make it as easy as possible for them

Now John's ministry of preparing is described like that – doing all he can to get things ready – only this time the preparation is about a

different Exile – the exile of sinners away from God; and now God is about to do something so fundamental to change that that, says John to his hearers, we've got to get ready

Using the language of something as physical as a landscape he likens it to our lives – the highpoints and low points, crooked roads and rough ways

To not miss out on the life changing act of God that is coming you've got to pull down, fill in, straighten out, smooth off your lives

READ v4b-6

What does that mean in practice ask three groups among his listeners: the crowd ask, "What should we do", the tax collectors ask, "What should we do," soldiers ask, "What should we do"?

They are asking the right question – what must WE do
They realize that just to plead they've been born Jews isn't enough – as someone put it: God doesn't have grandchildren, only children

READ 8b (And do not...")

Later on Jesus himself would tell the religious leader Nicodimus: like everyone else "you must be born again" – your Jewish pedigree is not enough

A reality on the inside needs to happen, so profound, that it finds expression on the outside, as evident as the movement of a child from inside the mother to outside

And just as a child has no say in the conception and the moment of birth, so this is all of God, all of grace

In this was Jesus describes what He has come to offer and, by His cross, to achieve

But at this point John can only point ahead to the coming of Jesus, call his hearers saying: Produce fruit in keeping with repentance (v8)

READ vv10-14

These aren't ways of repenting. They are some of the practical outcomes of a repentant life – one no longer fixed on self, but on God – and so on others

This in itself won't bring salvation.

Repentance opens the door, puts us in a position where we can recognize and receive this good thing from God John says is coming

The Bible commentator William Barclay sums up John's answers like this – repentant lives, freed up lives, find expression in being “committed to fairness to neighbours, sensitivity and responsiveness to others needs, and willingness to accept a no frills standard of living...”

In other words, repentant lives “put our money where our mouth is”, “walk the talk”, and prove the pudding, practical evidence on our part of the desire and willingness to get off the bus of Self and onto the bus with the destination God

Or to put it in terms of our passage: we do all we can to put ourselves in a position where “we will see God's salvation..”

A salvation that come and transforms us, not through our effort, but as we place ourselves regularly, consciously, willingly in the place where God's grace can act

I can't tell you what that looks like – we each need to do the thinking and praying for ourselves: where are the mountains and hills that need digging up, the valleys that need filling in, the crooked or rough roads that need straightening and smoothing?

How can I regularly, consciously, willingly in the place where God's grace can act

But I think Barclay's summary of John's answers to people like you and me is a good starting point

Ordinary people keen to place ourselves each day in the place where God can act:

READ v10

Repentant lives, freed up lives, lives open to God's grace find expression in being "committed to fairness to neighbours, sensitivity and responsiveness to others needs, and willingness to accept a no frills standard of living."