

Over these Sundays in Advent our Gospel readings are focussing on the figure of John the Baptist and his role as one preparing the way for Jesus. John must have been a formidable character. Certainly not one to skirt around an issue - you would know that he was talking to you and not the fellow behind you. He did not mince his words with Herod and he did n't mince his words with the crowds who came out to hear him, as we read in our Gospel reading this morning. "Brood of vipers" is not the remark of one exchanging pleasantries.

I would imagine he would be the sort of man who would evoke either deep admiration or a strong dislike. You get the impression that John did not really mind - the important thing for him was that people took his message seriously. God's Messiah was coming and people needed to prepare and at the heart of that preparation was John's call to repent.

Repentance is one of those key biblical words. It lies at the heart of the teaching of John and also of Jesus and so goes right to the heart of the Christian life.

It begins with confession, a recognition that things have gone wrong in our lives. That in itself is good - after all it takes honesty and not a little courage to admit, even to ourselves, that we have done wrong. Repentance goes beyond just confession. The Greek word *metavoia*, that we translate as 'repentance', means literally a 'change of direction'. In other words life has to change. And so John demands of those who come out to see him that they "produce fruits in keeping with repentance".

Just to illustrate the point a bit further, the American writer Mark Twain was once cornered by a man who said that he wanted to visit the lands of the Bible and in particular to stand on top of Mount Sinai and there recite the Ten Commandments. Twain asked rather acidly, "Would n't you be better to stay at home and keep them?"

Repentance, the Christian life in general, has to go beyond mere words and start working itself out in the nuts and bolts of daily living.

On one occasion, after a dispute with the Pharisees over his apparent scant regard for Jewish food and hygiene laws, Jesus explained to his disciples:

"Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean.' For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man 'unclean'; but eating with unwashed hands does not make him 'unclean.'" *Matthew 15:17-20*

The heart is where the battle has to be fought, where repentance, where change of direction has to begin.

Having seen John at his most acerbic, we then see a different side to John as he recognises among the people those who realise the truth of what he is saying and want to respond. He gives advice that goes to the very heart of their daily lives.

His first bit of advice addresses basic human selfishness; "The man with two tunics should share with the man who has none, and one who has food should do the same."

We are reminded in the first lesser of John: "We know by this that he laid down his life for us - and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?"

And so a people who wait for the Lord must be a people with a concern for issues of poverty and social justice. I would draw your attention to the various collections this time of year. This is a very specific way in which we who have tunics and food in abundance can share with those who have none.

John goes on to respond to those working in particular occupations. The tax gatherer who would have collected taxes not just for the Roman authorities but who would have kept some for himself - one of the perks of the job in those days. The soldier, poorly paid, who would have supplemented his income with a bit of extortion on the side. Note, John does not tell either of them to leave their jobs, rather they are to change the way they do their jobs. The tax gatherer is no longer to take extra for himself, the soldier is no longer to intimidate the local population. Their repentance, their preparation for the coming of the Lord, is to infiltrate every aspect of their life.

We are to take our Christian conviction out into every aspect of our lives. We

are to be a people who wait for the Lord not just in our worship, in our quiet times but also in our home life, our social life, our business life; we are to conduct our business and social life conscious that we are ones waiting for the Lord, servants not knowing when our master will return.

Advent reminds us that we are a people in waiting - waiting for the coming of our Lord. We wait not only confident of the blessings that await those who put their trust in Christ, we wait as ones who show that trust in lives committed to his service and the advancement of his kingdom of justice and peace here on earth.