

John the Baptist – and St Stephen’s

A sermon preached at St Stephen’s Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 5 December 2010, by David Gill. The readings for the second Sunday of Advent were Isaiah 11:1-10, Romans 15:4-13, St Matthew 3:1-12.

The Second Sunday of Advent. Last Sunday the curtain rose once again on our year-long replay of the Jesus drama. Suddenly, today, there thunders on to the stage that strange character they called John the Baptizer.

He has come stumbling out of the wilderness, which was seen in those days as a place of spiritual testing, spiritual insight. He must have looked a mess: gaunt (obesity is rarely a problem if you’ve been on a diet of locusts and wild honey!), clad in rags, with an unkempt beard and a passionate, perhaps slightly manic glare in his eyes as he went around shouting at people to repent.

All considered, John the Baptist does not sound like a particularly fun drinking companion, or someone you’d choose as your next door neighbour. Probably not someone you’d choose as the next minister of St Stephen’s either – being addressed as a brood of vipers every Sunday would take some getting used to.

What are we to do with this exotic character? The man himself can be dismissed easily enough as an eccentric. But don’t dismiss too quickly the message he brought or his role in the subsequent baptism of Jesus of Nazareth. For the gospels seem to suggest that he was saying something important. Two things, in fact.

First, John was a pointer, like one of those signs you see when travelling as a tourist. “Look,” they say. “Pay attention. Here is something – a view, a building, a historic site -- you shouldn’t miss”. “Look,” John is saying. “Pay attention. Here is someone you shouldn’t miss, someone of cosmic significance”.

Second, John was telling people to prepare. Big things are happening, the kingdom of God is at hand, the reign of love is coming, the one so long awaited is at the door. There will be no privileged in-group, no disregarded out-group, for we all face God's performance-based assessment -- so all without exception should repent. By that, John doesn't mean people must feel sad or guilty. He means people need to change. Repentance is about reversing direction, taking hold of your life and doing a u-turn with it.

That message, my friends, is for us too. John's summons to take stock, and where necessary to change, is part of Advent's call to make ourselves ready. It is why the Church prepares for Christmas with a seriousness, a solemnity, that the world cannot begin to understand.

Take stock? Change? What might this mean for us, here, now? What might it mean for St Stephen's?

Before I plunge into that minefield there is something else I want to say to you. You have been ten months without a pastor. A ministerial vacancy is never an easy time for a congregation. Things may keep going, but often morale drops and numbers dwindle as the leadership vacuum becomes painfully evident. As far as I can see you are coping with your vacancy remarkably well: spirits seem high, you are using your gifts well, good things keep happening. So full marks, St Stephen's.

Which is not to suggest there's no room for improvement!

Every so often – Advent is a wonderful opportunity for this – a congregation does well to look at itself self-critically, to identify where it may be slackening off a bit. It takes some effrontery for a visiting preacher to talk about this, but let me indicate five areas of this congregation's life that may benefit from your attention.

First, participation in divine worship. St Stephen's claims 115 members. Where are they all? On any given Sunday, in addition to visitors, we're lucky to see half that number. I know that membership figures should be treated with a certain skepticism. As a former bureaucrat myself, I know only too well that there are lies,

damned lies and church statistics! I realize too that infirmity, travel and other factors can arise. And it doesn't help when trains stop running, the CBD becomes a race track for the marathon or Sydney decides to have breakfast on the harbour bridge. Still, that discrepancy between membership and participation in worship is marked. It may indicate a spiritual slackness that needs to be addressed

Second, church finances. I keep hearing that this church has financial problems. A church like this should not have financial problems. It reminds me of the minister who told his congregation "I have good news and bad news. The good news is that we have enough money to cover the church's deficit. The bad news is that most of it is still in your bank accounts!" Giving may be another area where self-discipline needs tightening up.

Third, human relationships. They are not all as good as they ought to be. Work on them. In a few minutes we will pass the peace, before moving into holy communion. As we greet each other we won't just be saying hello. We'll be saying something about the gospel: that Christ binds us together, that before his holy table all human differences fall away, that we're letting go of hurts we may have suffered and asking forgiveness for hurts we may have inflicted. Life is too short and the gospel too great to keep worrying about things that don't matter.

Fourth, warmth towards visitors. I know that, in city churches especially, many visitors want only to pray, without being badgered by anyone. That's fine. A person's desire for peace and anonymity is to be respected. But that doesn't rule out a friendly smile, a quiet word. Watch, when you're at the door or downstairs in the hall after the service, and make sure nobody is feeling left out. It's good to talk with old friends. It's even better to make new ones.

Fifth, outreach. Not long ago I was taken aback when a friend, an overseas student, asked "David, may I go along to your church one Sunday morning?" It had never occurred to me to invite him. Sydney must be full of people like that, who would warm to an invitation to St Stephen's. We don't want to steal people from other churches, of course, but give some thought to your unchurched friends and neighbours and don't be shy about inviting them along. Growing the church is not

just the job of the pastor or the elders. Separately and together it is the privilege of us all.

Worship, finance, relationships, visitors, outreach.

This morning we lit the candle of preparation. Will you join me, during these days, in thinking and praying about how you and I, and St Stephen's as a whole, may be drawn more deeply into the preparation for Christ's coming?

May this Advent, for each of you and for this church, be a time of renewal.

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