

Fruit Worthy of Repentance

Advent II (A)

Isaiah 11.1-10/ Psalm 72/ Romans 15.4-13/ Matthew 3.1-12

St. Paul's Church, Halifax

9 December 2007

~Paul H. Friesen~

Today, as you know, is the Second Sunday of Advent—the candles tell the tale. And that's a good thing because we all need to know in the most practical, visible way that Christ is coming at Christmas, whether we are ready or not.

There are several ways to mark off the four Sundays of Advent. They are all helpful in different ways. But I would like to take my cue today from the biblical readings for the second Sunday of Advent. And what always comes up every year in our three-year cycle of readings for this particular Sunday is the story of John the Baptist.

But we don't begin with John the Baptist. We begin with the wonderful words of the prophet Isaiah we've already heard, which look forward to the world made right.

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.

This wonderful vision has inspired generations of Christian who have longed for peace, for the ending of great wars and personal strife. They wanted, and we want the blessing of the Apostle Paul, from this morning's Epistle: 'May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another.'

About a hundred and seventy years ago an American painter named Edward Hicks painted a canvas entitled "The Peaceable Kingdom."¹ It was his way of

¹ Hicks, in fact, painted a number of similar paintings of the same title in the 1840s.

visualizing Isaiah's vision. [The slide is to be projected for the remainder of the sermon.]

In this painting children stroke a leopard and a lion, a wolf and a lamb recline together, and a bear and a cow much on corn together at the edge of the forest. And in the background there is an attempt to see this promise through to the whole human race: Native chiefs and British diplomats gather around a shared covenant on the shores of North America as if the agreement is overseen by God himself—who, our Psalm tells us, will 'have dominion from sea to sea.'

It would be easy to mock this ideal—to mock the vision of 'The Peaceable Kingdom'. What we have done to nature and what we have done to Native North Americans over the past 500 years is anything but peaceable. But we are not condemned to the sin that so often has ruined our past.

The vision of Isaiah is still the vision for Christians, long after the last book of our Scriptures, *The Revelation of St. John* was written. The peaceable kingdom is what God has always promised us. And today John the Baptist helps us, and our generation, on our way towards the 'peaceable kingdom'.

So let's keep the vision of Isaiah the prophet, and the painting of Edward Hicks in our minds as we hear the words of John the Baptist on the second Sunday of Advent. His words are strong words and his message is, quite honestly, hard to bear.

So we have to keep thinking about where we want to go—Christ's 'peaceable kingdom'—if we want to endure the sermon that John the Baptist delivered.

John said to the religious folks of his day, the people who worshipped in the synagogue: 'You brood of vipers'—you nest of poisonous snakes—you're going to have to repent of your sins before anything changes. Of course, we are those people too!

Do you remember the bumper sticker from about ten years ago—or maybe more? It said 'If you want peace, work for justice'. This insight is a summary of the message of John the Baptist. 'In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" ... [and] the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the River Jordan.' Peace won't come if we see Christ's kingdom and turn the other way because we don't want to prepare for it.

John saw the kingdom of heaven, but only from a distance. But it was very real to him. He witnessed to the crowds that Jesus, his mother's cousin's son, was the Messiah. He saw his own disciples leave and follow Jesus. He saw the dark political clouds in the sky as he was arrested for insulting the king with his preaching. But he didn't ever really give up. 'Come, O Justice, come, O Peace:

Come and shape our hearts anew’—we shall sing this with John at the offertory. We can repent; we can desire peace and work for justice, because it is Jesus Christ who offers us the kingdom.

Jesus Christ offers us peace. John put our own job this way: Don’t think the Kingdom of God is for those with the right ancestors who inherit a heavenly passport. In our day he would say: don’t think calling yourself a Christian, or an Anglican, or an evangelical is enough. God isn’t interested so much in what we call ourselves, but how we live out our confession of faith. ‘Bear fruit worthy of repentance,’ John said. In other words: ‘If you want peace, work for justice’.

John said: ‘[Jesus] will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire’ —God’s peaceable kingdom cannot arrive without God judging between good and evil, without justice being done.

Last Sunday we talked about how to prepare for the coming of Jesus in the manger and the coming of Jesus at the end of time. We talked about a decision we might make, even a small one, to prepare for the day when the Christ Candle, the Christmas candle will be lit. We asked ourselves: When our Christmas shopping list has its last item crossed off and we are prepared to celebrate, will we have completed that one spiritual task on our list to make ourselves ready for Christmas?

Today we cannot avoid the repentance that John the Baptist preached about. If we haven’t already found that one spiritual task to complete, perhaps repentance is the key.

John the Baptist warned us that words of repentance were the beginning, not the end of repentance. What did he say to the religious folks amongst the crowds? ‘Bear fruit worthy of repentance.’ What does this mean?

In the churches in Medieval Europe there was something called ‘penance’—a list of tasks to do after one had confessed his sins, privately, to a priest. When that list was done, forgiveness was guaranteed. As you can imagine, this led to other problems.

The reformers pointed out the error of thinking acts of penance could guarantee forgiveness. But the reformers of the church (who brought the Anglican church and the Lutheran church and the Presbyterian church into being) didn’t offer the easy approach. The easy approach is what we sometimes see today—feeling shame or regret in the moment and saying to God or someone else that you’ve put it all behind you, and won’t think about it anymore.

Scripture teaches, and the Reformers rediscovered, that it is God who forgives—the God who knows us better than we know ourselves. We can’t trick God into thinking sin is a temporary lapse of judgement by feeling regret that our sin has been identified and then by saying we have put it behind us. And we often can’t trick each other either.

It certainly is God who forgives us—again and again, often for the same thing! Yet the reformers upheld the great truth we are meant to hear in John’s words: ‘Bear fruit worthy of repentance.’ This is where we have a role in welcoming the peaceable kingdom. We welcome the peaceable kingdom of Christ by a repentance that is more than words. We welcome the kingdom by the fruit of our lives.

How does this work? A few weeks ago, on Christ the King Sunday, I repeated the story told to me of how one business office, over the course of a year, switched between two kinds of coffee. The members of the office turned away from cheap coffee, which paid its very poor overseas producers very little. They paid more for ‘fairly traded’ coffee, which cost more, but which far more justly paid its poor overseas producers.

This didn’t make the members of that office free of sin! And international trade is complicated, and our motives are complex.

And it is easy to become self-righteous when we have done good.

But this group had more than a desire to be fair—their true change of heart and mind, what we call repentance, ‘bore fruit’.

In a small, but very real way, they were welcoming Christ’s peaceable kingdom. We can’t welcome Christ’s peace if we don’t let Christ change our lives—in small ways and very big ways.

Christ wants to forgive us—and Christ does. On the cross Christ suffered for the sins of the world and extended forgiveness to all of humanity—past, present and future. We repeat these wonderful words at every Eucharist. But Christ offers us a far more practical forgiveness than we usually appreciate. We often ignore this day to day repentance, because we are afraid of how it might change us, and how it might change the things and people around us.

What can we do? What I am saying to myself, is probably what we are all saying to ourselves: we need to take action in order to understand this truth. We have all heard stories about how repentance has changed lives—the biblical words for repentance, after all mean a ‘change’ of life, not a change of feeling only.

What can we do? We can confess sin to God today, and we can decide on one thing to do—one fruit of repentance. We can tell this to God alone in prayer, or to someone else, someone we trust, perhaps the prayer assistant in the baptismal chapel, or someone in our family and ask them to hold us to it.

The ‘fruit’ or repentance might be the first words out of our mouth when we meet someone we find difficult and they say something predictable and irritating to us. It might be the better answer we learn to repeat when we are weary and a child or a parent says something that angers us. It might be our shopping habits or what we say to a beggar. We welcome the peaceable kingdom best with real acts of justice, even if they are small.

Christ is ready to forgive—let's hear the call of John the Baptist.