

MATTHEW 3:1-12 ST JOHN'S, 4.12.16, 9.30 am

INTRODUCTION: REPENTANCE MEANS . . .

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (v 2, NIV). Jesus repeats John the Baptist's message word for word when he begins his public ministry in chapter 4. John goes on to talk about *the coming wrath* (v 7, NIV), about trees being cut down and thrown into the fire, and chaff being burned up with unquenchable fire. It's the kind of 'hell-fire and damnation' message which isn't very popular these days, but it is here in Scripture, so we need to take the warnings seriously.

We talk about repentance a lot in church, but how many of us really understand what it means? The Good News Bible gives us a clue, because it translates it *turn away from your sins*. To repent means to be sorry, to change your mind, and therefore your way of life, completely, to return to God, to reverse completely the direction of your life. When I meet with Baptism families, I often talk about repentance as doing a U-turn, and going in totally the opposite direction.

Repentance is about doing everything God's way, instead of 'my way'; it's about accepting God's will and God's lordship over our lives, which results in a radical change of lifestyle.

WHY REPENT?

John, and later Jesus, called people to repent because *the kingdom of heaven is near!* (v 2; cf 4:17) The *kingdom of heaven* is God's kingly rule, God's sovereignty. Jesus was about to begin his public ministry, which would ultimately lead to his death and resurrection, and it's Jesus'

death and resurrection which make it possible for people to be forgiven, to be put right with God, to be saved from *the coming wrath*. So, John says, the time has come to make a decision: are you for God or against him? Do you want God to save you, or would you rather face judgment? Are you going to rely on your regular churchgoing, your orthodox beliefs, your religious pedigree – or do you genuinely want to live your life as a subject of the kingdom of heaven, doing things His way? John urges the people coming out to him in the desert to make their decision fast, before they find that it's too late.

IF YOU DO REPENT . . .

People who do repent become subjects of the kingdom of heaven, with all the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. The rights include having a close relationship with the king of heaven, Jesus Christ; having a new start with the slate of life wiped clean of sin and guilt; and having the secure knowledge that when this life is over, a new and better life lies ahead. The responsibilities include handing over control of your life to the king; doing things His way, even when it doesn't suit you; and being prepared to forgive other people when they hurt or betray you.

People who do repent *prepare . . . a straight path for [the Lord] to travel* (v 3) into their hearts and lives. In those days roads were usually very poor, just baked earth, with lots of potholes, rocks and stones along the way. The only exceptions were roads made by special command of the king, so that he could travel in comfort. When people repent, they're obeying the command of the king of heaven to *prepare a straight path*

for him to travel. When people prepare that path by repenting, they find that the Lord himself comes along it and makes his home in their heart.

People who do repent want to confess their sins and to be baptized.

John's baptism was an outward sign that people recognised their need to repent, and their need for forgiveness if they were going to *escape from the punishment God is about to send* (v 7). John tells us here that his baptism doesn't have any inward effect, it simply *shows that you have repented* (v 11). At that time, baptism *with the Holy Spirit and with fire* (v 11) wasn't yet available. But that's all changed: since the time of Pentecost, it has been available to believers. So now, people who repent are baptized *with the Holy Spirit and with fire*, cleansing them from their rebellion against God, and changing them so that they no longer want to rebel against him.

People who do repent will *do those things that will show that they have turned from their sins* (v 8) – or *produce fruit in keeping with repentance* (NIV). When we repent, our hearts change, and therefore our lives change. If repentance is genuine, that's what happens, and we can't help but *produce fruit in keeping with repentance*. People who haven't repented can't produce that fruit, because it can't be added onto life – *fruit in keeping with repentance* can only grow out of repentant hearts.

Finally from this passage, people who repent become like the wheat which Jesus, the one to come, will gather into his barn. When grain is winnowed, it's thrown into the air. The heavy kernels fall back to the ground, while the lighter chaff is blown away in the wind. People who

repent become part of the Lord's harvest, to be gathered safely into his barn.

IF YOU DON'T REPENT . . .

People who don't repent will find that they miss out on all this. They'll find that they're left out of the kingdom of heaven, because they have no spiritual life to live in that kingdom.

People who don't repent won't be able to escape from *the punishment God is about to send* (v 7). John pictures them as snakes slithering away from a fire in a field of dry grass, but in this case, there's no escape.

People who don't repent can't produce *fruit in keeping with repentance*, they can't *do those things that will show that they've turned from their sins* (v 8). As I've just said, such fruit cannot grow out of unrepentant hearts. And so, they'll be like trees which don't produce good fruit, which will be *cut down and thrown in the fire* (v 10).

People who don't repent will also be baptized with the Holy Spirit and fire. But in their case, the fire won't cleanse and purify them; the fire will consume them. They'll find that they're like chaff which is either blown away, or thrown into a fire.

CONCLUSION

John gives very short shrift to the Sadducees and Pharisees who come to his baptism. It's a bit like a group of Bishops turning up and being told that they're snakes! The point is that John is able to discern that the Sadducees and Pharisees haven't repented, and have no intention

of doing so. And if John can't be fooled by a show of repentance, we can be sure that the Lord won't be fooled!

So, brothers and sisters, have you repented? Are you determined to live your life under the Lord's rule, doing everything his way, even when it doesn't suit you? Have you accepted both the rights and responsibilities of citizenship in the kingdom of heaven?

Or have you not repented? Are you putting on an outward show of religion, coming to church on a Sunday, but not allowing God to have any impact on the rest of your life? Do you want the rights and privileges of citizenship in the Lord's kingdom, without accepting the responsibilities? If that is the case, be warned: you might be able to fool us, but you won't be able to fool the Lord. And you won't be able to *escape from the punishment God is about to send* either.