

## **NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH**

### **ADVENT SUNDAY**

**SUNDAY 27 NOVEMBER 2011**

**Rev. Ivan Poole**

**Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 126; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8**

### **“Getting Ready”**

Have you found last year’s list yet? It was put away after all the Christmas things had been packed up. You know the Christmas card list! All the Christmas cards we received and the ones we sent. Did we send one to Aunty Flo last year? We got one from Jack Smith I remember and we hadn’t heard of him for years. Do you think we ought to send him one this year? What about so and so, we haven’t heard from them for years and we keep sending a card each year! We must get the overseas cards away soon -as they will not make it in time. Do you think we ought to write a family letter and put it in all the cards?

Are the relatives coming for Christmas? Is it our turn to entertain the family this year? What about the decorations? The Christmas tree? Where are all the decorations? Have you started your Christmas shopping yet? We must get all the presents wrapped and ready early and not leave it till the last moment!

And so it goes on! Familiar in your house? Is this the way to prepare for Christmas? Are we really Getting Ready?

The retail stores are at it nice and early with piped music Jingle belting in your ears each time you go into the store. They are certainly ‘getting ready’. Is it all worth it? Mark doesn’t seem to think so. His Gospel has nothing about all this activity we find ourselves getting involved in.

Mark’s Gospel does not begin with angels whispering in Mary’s ear. There are no shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night, no wise men from the east following a star, no big eyed animals standing around a straw stuffed manger. Mark either does not know about those things or else he does not care about them. For him, the good news of Jesus Christ begins in the wilderness of Judea with an old time prophet named John, the last real prophet to turn up in Israel for 300 years.

What an odd character he was as we have described in the gospels. He was dressed in camel’s hair with a leather belt, the exact same outfit that Elijah wore 800 years before him. What a character to be introduced in the beginning of a gospel!

The man was a messenger - predicted by Isaiah dressed like Elijah, sent by God, a prophet in the classic mould. Why did the people go to hear him? It wasn’t as if he were next door, or in the temple or the local synagogue!

He set himself up in the wilderness, and anyone who wanted to hear what he had to say had to go to the trouble to get there. If you were from Jerusalem it would be much better to go to the temple and talk to the rabbis and hear all their accumulated wisdom of the religious establishment. If someone wanted to hear from God, then why not stay in the city? Maybe attend some extra services or make an appointment to see the high priest.

Anyone who would turn away from all that and set off into the wilderness was looking for something

the temple could not or would not supply.

It would seem odd that we should use this particular reading in Advent in preparing for the birth of Jesus! But it's his message that is important and for Mark in the time that he was writing it was important to present a creditable picture of Jesus to his fellow Jews.

Mark does not give us any background of John the Baptist, we have to go elsewhere for that. He was the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth. If you remember Luke tells the story of the old priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth who had been without a child until their old age (somewhat like Abraham and Sarah). Elizabeth was related to Mary the mother of Jesus and when pregnant with Jesus went to visit her relative who was also pregnant with John. It is in Luke where we hear Mary sing her song of joy called the Magnificat.

And so John was born and as Luke says: 'The child grew and became strong in spirit and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.'

He was one of those charismatic leaders who very soon had a very big following. We are sort of used to charismatic speakers nowadays, usually fairly fiery and soon attract large crowds many of whom have a variety of needs. "Some of the crowd who came to hear John no doubt came out of sheer curiosity, some from boredom but many with a spiritual hunger. John saw himself as a herald, a forerunner whose mission in life was to announce to the world that the long awaited Messiah would soon be arriving. You can picture him out in the wilderness or down by the river Jordan with a large crowd gathered about him haranguing them to repent.

**'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'**

The preaching of John the Baptist fulfilled the Scripture and prophecy of Isaiah, calling on the people to repent and to be baptised and by pointing ahead to the coming one.

From God's promise in the past, the story moves to John's call to his hearers to respond to the present, and to his announcement of what God is about to do in the future.

Three major themes emerge from our passage:

**Expectancy**, found in the Old Testament promises:

**Repentance**, what his hearers must do:

**The Coming One**, what God will do.

**Expectancy:** Mark cleverly uses Old Testament references to prepare his listeners for what is to follow.

The Israelites were longing for the promised one to help them overthrow the Romans and here was a prophet in the classical mould and they flocked to hear him.

John the Baptist looked forward to the coming of Jesus Christ and the remainder of Mark's gospel looks forward to his coming again.

The annual occurrence of the Advent season invites us to expect not only some far off event, but also to expect that the one who came into Galilee preaching a kingdom near at hand may come to baptise us with the Holy Spirit this year ....soon ....now.

And how are we to prepare for this event?

**Repentance:** To the crowds who flocked to hear him, this was John's message. Just what is the meaning of repentance, both then and now?

You've no doubt seen the magazine cartoons about the odd bearded gentleman who walks about the streets with a board saying 'repent' with some punch line to follow. The word in modern day has lost a lot of its meaning and yet it is word and an action that is very important on the road to a strong faith. The Greek word used here means 'to change one's mind'. Behind this stands the Hebrew word which means 'to turn around' that is to change one's heart, will and conduct.

The word has '**confession**' as part of its meaning as John indicates. But we all have been sorry for things we have said or done, only to repeat our conduct before long.

**First** repentance begins with an honest recognition of our wrongful actions or words or omissions and to say we are sorry.

There is a second stage to repentance; a determination not to repeat one's wrongful conduct and this is not easy as many if not all of you know.

And there is a third stage to repentance; inward change. Here is what John was demanding of his followers. Jesus too demanded this in the reply he made to the Pharisees question of the great commandment, **to love God with heart, soul and will, your total life.**

To repent truly, that is, to change genuinely, to do this I require a power greater than my own, so prayer is a necessary part of true repentance. As a sign of true repentance, John baptised those who confessed and even though it caused the early church some theological problems, Jesus himself came to John to be baptised.

Mark focuses on repentance as a preparation for the Lord's coming.

**The Coming One:** The major emphasis of the final verses of our reading is not on the wilderness, or the prophet, or the Old Testament references.

The major emphasis is on the Lord whose way John prepares, on the one who is coming.

John affirms two things about this coming one:

First, he is greater than his herald.

Second, he announces what the coming one will do; 'He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit'.

So, no angels, no shepherds, no wise men, no inn with no room, no manger and yet this text from Mark still encounters every hearer:

Repent

A rough and roaring prophet can still call the hearer to turn around, accept the baptism offered by the risen Lord, and thus experience his coming as a powerful, personal Advent.

So in all the hustle and bustle of Christmas cards and buying gifts and being stressed and singing carols about cold winter nights let us as we prepare today for the coming weeks before Christmas and the coming of the Christ child by thinking seriously of John's call to repentance as we '**get ready**' to follow this child.