

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 15 JANUARY 2012

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

Genesis 8: 6 - 12, Psalm 29, Matthew 3

“A Voice over the Water”

Vipers, snake in paradise, snakes in desert, snake on a stick, bark man Jesus.....

The text from Matthew we read this morning is once again a very rich one. Studying it this week, I felt at times overwhelmed with the wealth of references, allusions and imagery.

To do it justice some serious unpacking over a couple of sessions is called for. There is certainly more than can be addressed in 10 minutes of sermon, and yet this is what I am called to do. To show you some of the things I have seen and indicate where I see these things connect to our life here and now, twenty centuries after the text was written.

Perhaps that's where we start first. The text was written in a very different time in a very different context. Historically, philosophically and religiously. Some of it so far from our own reality, that I am not sure we will be able to bridge the gap between us, here, now, and Matthew, John the Baptist, Jesus and their disciples back then.

For starters there is the concept of repentance that is very central to the passage and the eschatological over and undertones that come with it.

John the Baptist, and probably Jesus, expected the day of judgement to come soon. A time where the Messiah would come and finally bring clarity to all the ambiguity of life, punish the bad and reward the good, separate the positive from the negative and establish a new and different reality called the Kingdom of God.

John especially seems to believe that this time is near, and urges those who come to listen to his preaching to change the direction of their life and repent.

The way he goes about this is reminiscent of the old prophets and their lives and preaching. Withdrawing into the wilderness like Moses and Elijah before him, old testament prophecies about the coming of the Messiah come to life as he preaches dressed in a mantle of camel hair, a leather belt around his waist.

Elijah was said to have worn a mantle just like it, which he left to Elisha when he departed on a fiery chariot from that same Judean wilderness we now find John in. A mantle Elisha split the waters of the river Jordan with, in imitation of Moses, another great prophet.

John's diet indicates he is in serious preparation for an important event, totally focussed on his message, not interested in eating or drinking other than to sustain his body (and apparently it would not have been an unhealthy diet as far as nutritional value is concerned).

Is there a reference to manna here? It says in Exodus and Numbers that it tasted like wild honey and Matthew's readers were bound to pick up on that detail. Indicating that here is someone eating the food of the Exodus, indicating we are on our way to the promised land. Here we are at the river

Jordan, and the water is about to be split again, and a path to be created to the other side.

The water John baptises with again evokes a plethora of images from the Hebrew scriptures. Like fire, water is often a symbol for calamity or instrument of judgement in the scriptures.

In Genesis 1 the world is born from a churning mass of water, with the Spirit of God brooding over it like a bird sitting on its eggs.

In the story of Noah the world is born again - from the waters of judgement and calamity.

Ezekiel paints the picture of a stream flowing from the temple changing the world as it flows down to the sea.

In antiquity great expanses of water were thought to be in direct connection with the underworld, the powers of death lurking just beneath the surface.

It was the stuff that made things grow, that cleaned and nurtured, but it could also be the source of destruction and death and was therefore regarded with awe and held in superstitious regard.

It's not "just water" John dunks people in, it is death itself he submits the people who come to him to.

Although there are some similarities with other water rituals of the time at first glance, John's baptism is unique. It is a once and for all, for Jews only, ritual, that had little to do with the daily cleansing rituals of the Essenes, contemporaries of John and Jesus who had also withdrawn to the desert calling for repentance and a strict and ascetic lifestyle.

It had even less to do with the cleansing priests were called to undertake before and after duty at the temple.

Later, Judaism developed a baptism for gentile converts, but that was, at this time, as far as we know, not being practised as yet.

John seems to have invented this ritual all by himself and that's probably why his nickname "the baptist" stuck. This Baptism was his hallmark, was what distinguished him from other teachers and preachers. The ritual appealed to people. The text tells us that people from all around Judea and Jerusalem flocked to the river to be dunked. Unto the repentance of sin.

And there is another concept we, in our time may have difficulty connecting with. As much as the idea of retreating to the wilderness in anticipation of the day of judgement, as well as the many connections to places all over scripture relating to it may feel alien to us, a general call to repentance is even less part of our daily discourse.

Although... it made me think of an excursion to a Jewish Mikveh last year where we visited the ritual baths Jewish women visit monthly, as well as on some special occasions for a cleansing ritual. The lady that runs the bath told us their popularity is rising, and especially amongst young Jewish women who see it as a way to purify and focus their spiritual wellbeing.

And what about all these modern diets and retreats that are so much in fashion? Places in the country that offer not exactly locusts and wild honey, but honest, vegetarian, raw foods that will cleanse your body and purify your soul, accompanied with often strenuous spiritual exercises and

rituals. Sweat huts, cold baths, it's all on offer.

Other rituals, such as the Catholic confessional however has seen a significant drop in popularity in the last couple of years, as has the use of prayers of confession and the call to repent in Protestant worship. Many think we have grown past a stage of religion where confessing our sins and repenting them were a regular part of our religious commitments, to be performed with sincerity and necessary to keep ourselves pure before God.

Modern psychology rejects the practice as an unnecessary and unhealthy dwelling on human faults that will lead to depression, self-deprecation or even, in some cases, encourage self-loathing. Especially when it concerns a weekly, or even daily, ritual of reciting our faults and sharing them with God or priest.

What John was on about however was not this practice of regular self examination and reflection on one's behaviour. Even though it is somewhat out of fashion at the moment, I think most of us would still be able to imagine a practice like that being advertised and in some cases perhaps even being healthy as long as it did not go overboard. What John was on about went much further and deeper than that.

His baptism "unto repentance" calls for a one off total turnaround of life. A radical letting go of the past in favour of something totally different. Of dying to the old life and rising to something radically new.

That's where his harsh words to the Pharisees and Sadducees come from. They lived a life the daily ritual of repentance was regarded to be a natural and necessary part of. It's not enough, John says, this daily ritual only masks the underlying self-satisfaction of people who think they have God in their pocket. Being sons of Abraham is not enough, following your religious commitments in life is not enough, a regular beating up of self is not enough. If you are still living like vipers your tree is ready to be axed.

(And where have we seen those before? Remember the snake that got into Eden? Remember the snakes that tried to kill off God's people in the wilderness? It looks like they are still around, this time in the shape of malfunctioning leaders).

It's pretty intense language and imagery John uses here, language and imagery that draws us into a world that is alien to us. It smacks of a religiosity most of us would make sure to stay clear from.

We don't like to be confrontational, a call to confession and repentance are only just part of our vocabulary, highly stylised within the safe boundaries of Sunday worship and brought up only once every so many weeks in many of our Churches, the thread of unquenchable fire something we'd like to avoid mentioning if at all possible.

We like to be nice to each other, believe we are decent people, with no more than peccadilloes to confess. And we've made ourselves and others believe it is better for us not to dwell on those, and look at the bright side of life.

Christianity is about love we tell each other, and forgiveness. Harsh words like those of John do not belong in a Church where Christ reigns. And yet. Jesus himself, somewhat later on in the gospel of Matthew repeats his call for repentance and conversion. Reflecting on it this week I realised we may have lost something important here which comes to light when we move from John the Baptist to Jesus as he appears on the banks of the river Jordan.

No sin. Not even peccadilloes some Church dogmatics have argued. Would he be human without those, others have wondered? Surely, to be one of us, he must have known weaker moments as well?

However that may be, John recognises in Jesus someone who does not need to convert, does not need to turn his life around. Someone he, the prophetic voice in the wilderness, living a life of pure dedication and focus on the coming of the Kingdom, is not worthy even to serve in the most demeaning way.

No need for repentance.

And still Jesus insists on descending into the water and be dunked in with everyone else. Not because he needs to be cleansed from great sin, but because he is part of the brokenness of the human condition. The brokenness that would drown the world as in the days of Noah if God had not promised to keep that tsunami of violence and death in check. He descends into the waters of death and lets them close over his head. Dying and rising again to a new life, lived according to new rules, expecting a new order to take over.

The journey to the cross starts here where Jesus chooses to be part of something he has no part in.

A dove comes down, the bird that found dry land for Noah after the flood finds firm ground again.

A place where the seed of the Kingdom can start to grow. Again the text echoes with references and allusions to scripture and prophets. Creation starts over with a bird brooding over the churning waters of death, the flood recedes as the dove finds a place to rest, the heavens open as the new Moses finds his way to the other side of the water, as the new Elijah finds his way to the riverbank in the wilderness.

It's absolutely amazing what Matthew brings together in these words dense with meaning, indicating that here history is about to set a new course.

Jesus joins humanity in its brokenness, seeks forgiveness for sins not even committed, but part of his existence as a human being nevertheless. To fulfil all righteousness.

And as he does so, and as he rises from the water, the heavens open, the veil is lifted, the connection between heaven and earth re-established in him who is prepared to stand with the brokenness, even where he has no part in its creation. And that then is where healing occurs. Real healing.

The healing of true repentance, of true, deep felt sadness about the world, facing its lostness in death, taking it on, drowning in it, trusting God will make the waters recede, find dry ground for the dove to nestle and bring peace.

There is no use for confessing for the sake of confessing. The psychologists are right. John the Baptist said it already. Don't presume your pedigree, your status or your religious practices will keep you safe from the raging fire of judgement. More is needed. Follow our Lord into the water and repent for all that is wrong with the world, let it be washed away by the Spirit, and rise to a new life, a new future.

This is not about a regular dutiful beating up of yourself. It is about the recognition that there is a lot that is wrong with our world, with our lives, with the whole order of things. And about committing

to no longer wanting to be part of that, to no longer accepting that as the natural god-given way, but condemn it, strongly, as evil we know is destined to be blown or burnt away. Amen.