

An Awkward Message

Luke 3:1-6

Everton Hills

6 December 2015

I have a confession to make. Over the last number of years, I haven't really enjoyed the lead up to Christmas. The busyness of working in a college with end of year deadlines, Valedictory services, Graduation Services, Thanksgiving Services... and at the same time preparing for Christmas Services and all the rest, I have allowed it become more of a chore than a delight.

But this year, that changed. Monday week ago, I attended one more chore... the Junior Campus' Christmas Musical. I didn't really want to go. It's been a busy year. But out of a sense of duty I went.

It's what I needed. The storyline, the choir of 60 children's voices, all made it a special and important event for me; so much so that I sent an email to Sherree Cudney, our Junior Campus music teacher...

Hi Sherree

Just wanted to say that last night was awesome. You had those kids singing beautifully. It really brought the start of Christmas home to me.

And Sherree sent a lovely reply

Aww thanks David

It seemed to be really well received by both the parents and the kids.

So glad we could add a little to the Christmas spirit.

To which I replied

It is actually what I really needed. In my role each year Christmas is something you do... last night I was the recipient 😊😊

The Christmas Season. November and December. They have to be among the most crazy months of the year – especially if you have anything to do with schools. If someone from another planet would watch how we in the Western world live during November and December, they would have to think that we are all a bit deranged. Frantically trying to fit in as much as we can into the limited time that we have. Christmas parties. Work gatherings. School celebrations. And in between all of that, trying to find time to go Christmas shopping – usually spending money we don't have on gifts that people don't need, planning that big Christmas dinner – knowing that we are going to feel bloated and uncomfortable for the remainder of the day; and dangling from precarious angles, trying to hang Christmas lights from the house. And in the midst of this frenetic pace, calling it the Season of Peace.

To observe the hurrying and scurrying, one would have to conclude that we are all just a little bit crazy!

So, this is what I want you to think about. How are you preparing for Christmas, this year?

In the Christian church year, this is the season called Advent. Advent is a Latin word which means “approach” or “arrival.” For Christians, advent is the time to prepare for the arrival of the Christ child; that tiny baby, born in an unkempt stable, in the humble backyard town of Bethlehem.

That’s the image we like.

But there is another part of the Advent season that we often don’t reflect upon. That is, the preparation of Jesus’ second arrival when he returns to sort the sheep from the goats, to sift the wheat from the chaff. That’s the awkward message that we often forget at Christmas time. This baby that comes into the world, is also going to judge the world!

So how are you preparing for Christmas? I’m not meaning about preparing for the holiday season. I’m not meaning about preparing for a Christmas dinner, or Christmas gifts. How are you preparing for Christ? Because Christ is always central to Christmas. Christ begins Christmas!

John the Baptist gives us a clue as to how to prepare for Christ-mas.
“Then John went from place to place on both sides of the Jordan River, preaching that people should be baptized to show that they had repented of their sins and turned to God to be forgiven.” (Luke 3:3, NLT)

He was called the “baptist” because he encouraged people to be baptized. To be washed. To be transformed. And in doing so, he encouraged the people to repent.

When you hear that word ‘repent’ what do you think of. Perhaps you think of someone standing on the corner with a washboard sign – **“Repent”**. Perhaps you think of a school head master or a parent telling you off.

But neither of those images convey the real idea of repentance. Those images are more about judgment and condemnation than about repentance. Repentance is about preparation...

“Isaiah had spoken of John when he said, “He is a voice shouting in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the LORD’s coming! Clear the road for him!’” (Luke 3:4, NLT)

To “repent” means to change direction.

If you are driving along a country road and you realise that you have taken a wrong turn, when you turn around to correct your course, you repent.

If you are digging a hole and you realise that you are digging it in the wrong spot, when you stop digging, and relocate where you need to dig, you repent.

If you keep having arguments with your spouse, your boss or your kids and you decide that instead of arguing you are going to talk calmly about your concerns, you repent.

John’s invitation to those who heard him speak, and John’s invitation to you and to me, is, as we prepare for Christmas, we take time to reflect and take stock of our lives, to reflect and think about relationship with God, with ourselves and with others, and if things are not going the way that they could or should be going, to repent!

If you are finding yourself spending more time looking at your phone than looking at your partner, then repent.

If you are spending more time thinking about what you don’t have, than you think about being thankful for what you do, then repent.

If you are more materialistic than spiritual, if God is simply an addendum to your life rather than being central to it, then repent.

Change direction in your life. Make a U-turn. Start again.

You see repentance isn’t about judgement. It is about opportunity. It’s about opportunity because we know that the one about whom John the Baptist said “I am not even worthy to be his slave and carry his sandals,” is the one whose birth we are preparing for, but also the one whose death and resurrection enables us to look in the mirror, be honest with ourselves, see what is really there, and then live life, and live it to the full!

As one person has said...

“[Repentance] is a process of addition – not subtraction. It is a process of acquisition, not elimination...You repent by ceasing to try to lessen who you are and allowing [Christ] to increase who you are. In short, you repent by “losing yourself” and “finding yourself”.

It is only in Jesus that true repentance is possible! Without him, when we see the stuff that messes with us, we look at it as either a stain that can’t be shifted or as something doesn’t really exist; the first has no hope. The second has no honesty!

In Jesus, all things are possible. History no longer needs to control us. To identify our sins, and take them to the foot of the cross, is when true life begins. As someone once said, “when your soul has laid down its faults at the feet of Christ, you feel as though you have wings.” It is at the foot of the

cross that grace and suffering meet, and we experience the profound depth of God's love!

And that's what Luke confirms, as he quotes Isaiah concerning John the Baptist...

"The valleys will be filled, and the mountains and hills made level. The curves will be straightened, and the rough places made smooth. And then all people will see the salvation sent from God.' "" (Luke 3:5-6, NLT)

Christ is God's salvation. Will you prepare your hearts to see him this Christmas?

The shepherds found him in a smelly stable.
The wise men found him in an outpost town.
Where will you find him... don't look for the glitter... look for the dust and the dirt and the grime. Because God continues to come to us in humble, ordinary ways.

In the humble sacrament of baptism, as Christ begins his work of creating faith and giving the forgiveness of sins.

In the simple simplicity of a meal of bread and wine, the Lord's Supper. In the humble bread and wine you find God's salvation – the body and blood of Christ, given and shed for you, for the forgiveness of sins.

Are you ready for Christmas this year?

Perhaps, more to the point, are you ready for Jesus? Are you ready to celebrate his first coming? And are you ready to receive him, when he comes again in all of his glory?

May the coming Christ, fill you with his peace this Christmas, assuring you of your forgiveness, and empowering you to change directions when you need to. Let him prepare you for the day you see him, not in a card, or a manger scene, but face to face. Amen.

