

St Michael and All Angels

Ōtautahi / Christchurch

7 December 2025 / 2nd Sunday of Advent

Homily

Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.’ ”

Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region around the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Therefore, bear fruit worthy of repentance, and do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

“I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I, and I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Continuous Conversion of Life

In today's gospel, we encounter John the Baptist, the mysterious figure in the wilderness who proclaims, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." John's message, to both ancient and contemporary audiences, is neither gentle nor comforting. Instead, John's announcement acts as a challenge, a wake-up call. The reason John's proclamation contains some degree of tension for us is that John, as a prophet, represents a messenger who stands at the threshold between the old and the new. He stands at the boundary between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant, between the old creation and the new creation, between the old self and the new self and as such, John is urging us to prepare our hearts for the one who is coming after him.¹

Therefore, when we hear John say, "Prepare the way of the Lord," we should not simply assume he means, 'make the necessary arrangements for the arrival of Jesus,' but rather, to consider whether you are prepared in heart, mind, and spirit to receive the good news of the gospel, so much so that you will be ready to lead a life that is "worthy of repentance." John's urgent call from the wilderness challenges us to awaken, repent, and ready our whole selves for the transforming nature of God's kingdom.

Like many misunderstood biblical themes, John's challenge of repentance can make some of us feel anxious, as though an unfair weight is being placed on us. However, repentance has little to do with 'emotional states' or feelings of guilt and moral regret. Most of us are probably familiar with the idea that repentance signals a kind of 'turning around,' a change of direction. Still, a more helpful view considers repentance as a 'returning.' Repentance involves recognising wrongdoing or dead works and changing behaviour, but primarily it is about renewing our love and loyalty towards God.

¹ Colossians 3:9-10; Romans 6:6; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15 — "Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed."

Therefore, repentance is relational before it is emotional, as it begins with an intentional return to the life of God and a realignment of the self with God's will. In early Christian thought, repentance also represented the continuous conversion of life, a leaving behind of the harmful areas of our attitudes and appetites.

Accordingly, for the early Church, repentance was not a one-time action but a lifelong process and an ongoing posture of faith. So, as John calls us to repent, let us remind ourselves that we are being called to recognise that some things in our lives are misaligned with God, and, as such, we are called to repentance, reorientation, return, and renewal by stepping back into a healthy relationship with God.

The Axe Lying at the Root of the Tree

Over the years and through many conversations, numerous people have told me they are of the Anglican or Roman Catholic faith, or simply 'a Christian.' When, out of genuine interest in making a connection, I have asked "where do you worship and receive the Eucharist," the reply has often been that they do not go to church but consider themselves Anglican or similar due to their family heritage. And while I do not dismiss the significance of lineage or a family's spiritual bloodlines, I sometimes wonder: if our heritage, rather than a lived faith, is our fallback, then aren't we at risk of taking the same position as the Pharisees and Sadducees in our gospel story, where they imply that they are in good standing with God because "They have Abraham as their ancestor"?

John warns us that the "Axe is lying at the root of the trees; and therefore, every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

Therefore, John's challenge to the culturally religious people of his time reveals to us today the danger of trusting in heritage, titles, or outward identity to please God. As such, in John's example, faith in God begins with repentance, not with our lineage, pedigree, or labels.

All these themes of repentance, reorientation, return, and renewal follow the biblical pattern of placing the life of Christ at the centre of all life itself. Even John, in his ministry, consistently celebrates and points to a power beyond himself, whether he is leaping with joy in Elizabeth's womb after hearing Mary's greeting, or declaring, "I baptise you with water, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire." John continually points to a hope far beyond himself and to the understanding that Christ's baptism of the Holy Spirit will prepare us not for cultural rules but for a relationship with him, as we encounter the life of God in the Word made flesh.

Therefore, Jesus comes not only to gather and heal the lost but also to empower them; for to be baptised with the Holy Spirit is to have the dead parts of our lives consumed by holy fire, to have what is broken, redeemed, and to ignite what is good.

Today's passage calls us to hear John's voice, not from a distant, lost wilderness but from our present location, and to confront whatever hardens our hearts or distracts us from living a life worthy of repentance. It urges us to prepare ourselves for the kingdom that is drawing near and to make room for Christ's transforming presence.

Closing Prayer

Gracious and Holy God, we give thanks for the voice that cries out from the wilderness, for John the Baptist who still calls to us across the ages. Help us to hear his call not as a burden, but as an invitation—an invitation to awaken. Lord, teach us that repentance is not a moment of shame but a movement towards relationship; not simply a turning around, but a returning to you. And as John pointed beyond himself to the one who is coming, may we in this season of Advent also lift our eyes to Christ. In your holy name we pray.

Amen.