

Now may I speak in the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, today is the second Sunday of Advent and as well as thinking about St. Nicholas, it's a day when the church is called to remember John the Baptist. So just as the world around us ramps up the sentimentality quotient for Christmas, we're called to remember the least sentimental person in the whole Bible. He's the one prophet that you don't want turning up at your Christmas party. He's unkempt, he'd come inappropriately dressed. If he didn't smell, his camel hair loin cloth certainly would. He wouldn't eat the food. He'd probably bring his own bag of locusts. And you certainly wouldn't want him talking to your guests. Can you imagine? This is a man with absolutely no small talk and a very disconcerting way of straight talking.

John the Baptist was the voice crying out in the wilderness with a simple message, "prepare the way of the Lord". And it's very important to prepare. I read a story this week about someone who didn't prepare. His name was Larry Walters. He wanted to be a pilot in the US Air Force, but was turned down, but he never gave up the hope of flying. And he was determined to be airborne and one day he had a great idea, except he was very badly prepared. He went to the Army surplus store and bought some weather balloons, 48 actually, and tied them to a chair, which he then tied to his Jeep. And he had an air pistol, and the idea was that he was going to float up and then as he wanted to come down, control his altitude by shooting the various air balloons.

Well, it didn't quite work out as he'd anticipated. When he cut the cord with his chair to the Jeep, he didn't gently ascend into the sky. He went whoosh, right up to 11,000 feet and drifted for 14 hours. I am assured this is entirely true because there are witnesses, because somebody... He drifted to near LAX airport and a pilot called the Air Traffic Control and said, "There's a man at 11,000 feet on a chair and he's armed." Sadly, the reply of the air traffic controller's not recorded. That's where my story ended. But anyway, I thought it was a good story about someone who wasn't prepared. If he had his

time again, he'd no doubt do it very differently. Cut down on the air balloons for one thing.

But back to John the Baptist. John the Baptist came so that we would be prepared for the coming of the king, for the establishing of the new kingdom that comes with the birth of Jesus Christ. And I want to say in the first instance, not something about what John said, but actually where he said it, where he delivered this message of repentance and the need for preparation. It's important to note that John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness. The Gospel of Matthew makes a point of telling us that John appears and cries out in the wilderness. That's where the people went to hear him, in a landscape that is both desolate and barren.

And we know from all the real estate programs that there are on TV that it's all about location. Location, location, location, they say. The place where we stand, the terrain we occupy, the space from which we speak, these things matter. The wilderness is a place of vulnerability, risk, and powerlessness. There's no safety net in the wilderness. In the wilderness, life is raw and unsettled, and our illusions of self-sufficiency soon disappear. To locate ourselves at the outskirts of security and power is to confess our neediness in the starkest terms.

But the Gospel of Matthew goes on. Not only is the wilderness a place that exposes our need for God, it also calls us to repentance. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near," John cries out to those who come to hear him. And the people listened. They streamed out into the wilderness to hear John's preaching. In other words, they left behind the lives they knew best and ventured into the unknown to save their hearts through repentance.

Something about the wilderness brings us to our knees. Advent begins in the dark and it begins in the wilderness, with an honest, wilderness style reckoning of our sins. We can't rush to the manger in Bethlehem without first going to John in the wilderness. And to think about John is to think

about repentance. People weren't going out to see John just to confess particular sins or merely owning up to the odd mistake or confessing a bad habit. They discovered, as we need to discover, that what ails us is something deeper, grim, and far more consequential.

Sin is not just a breaking of God's law. That doesn't go far enough to express the full extent of what we struggle with. Sin is what holds us back from following Jesus wholeheartedly. Sin is an estrangement, an alienation, a disconnection with the God who made us. It's also to be disconnected from the self that we truly want to be. Sin is a walking death, a walking away from God. And it's easier to spot, name, and confess a walking death in the wilderness than anywhere else.

So, the repentance that John is calling for is dynamic. The Greek word for repentance is *metanoia*, which is literally a turning around, a turning to face a different direction. It's not just acknowledging the odd bad habit, and it's certainly not about feeling guilty. To repent is to be reorientated. It's a turn towards God. It's an expression of our desire to turn and walk His ways. To repent is to turn around and head off in a different direction. To repent is to turn away from all the things that hold us back and to turn towards the God made known in Jesus Christ.

So may we heed the voice of John the Baptist this Advent and prepare for coming of Jesus. May our preparations for Christmas be more than what we do with our decorations, with food and presents. Let's be open to find some time for deep spiritual preparation. Let's not be afraid of going to a wilderness place and recognizing afresh our need to turn away from all that holds us back and turn instead to the one who came in Bethlehem to set us free. The one who overcame the powers of sin and death. The one in whose victory we can share. The one who leads us out of the wilderness, out of darkness, and calls us to walk in His glorious light.

Amen.