

J O H N T H E
B A P T I S T

SERIES ON MATTHEW I
MT ALBERT BAPTIST CHURCH

A SERMON BY STUART MCGREGOR
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It was 11.00pm Friday night down at the bottom of Queen Street and quite a crowd had gathered around the fountain in QE II square.

There were lots of giggles and quiet scoffs on the outer edges of the crowd, loud enough to be heard, but quiet enough to be politically correct.

It was quite an assortment of people. There were the clubbers wearing their designer clothes from High Street, there were the street people wearing whatever they had, buskers wearing alternative lifestyle clothes. There were those who were finishing off a hard week at the office, and there were those who had climbed out of the window of their bedrooms after they had said good night to mum and dad. Many were happily lubricated with alcohol of some description, many were high on other things. Some were with no-one, and just wanted to be with a crowd so that they wouldn't feel alone.

A good portion of the guys were sexually charged and were out to "get some slapper" many of whom would not succeed because, well, they just didn't have what it took for some reason.

A good portion of the girls were helping these guys achieve their goal by availing themselves for "getting laid"—only some of those intentionally. Most of them were judging how fat or tanned they looked by measuring up the other women around them.

The low distinct hum of the boy racers itching to get to the next red light before anyone else, the huge subs pumping enormous amounts of bass into egos already overloaded with testosterone filled the night with an energy that wasn't negative, but it wasn't positive either.

At the centre of the crowd was a bizarre looking man. He was probably from Taranaki—which is not the reason he looked bizarre—he just had that look about him that said "I don't live anywhere near State

highway 1.” He was wearing gumboots, possum skin pants, and a jacket made out from the hide of a cow. From his bag came the stench of un-refrigerated raw meat and if you looked closely (which you probably wouldn’t) you could see a jar of raw sugar popping out the top.

He wasn’t dirty, he just wasn’t clean. He didn’t smell, but he looked like he ought to. His beard was enormous, his nose was peeling and his hair dreadlocked in a non-surfy, non-intentional kind of way.

He finished off his piece meat, chewed on it awhile, swallowed, took a swig of water from his very old sprite bottle. And looked at the crowd. And like a pebble thrown into a pond, his gaze sent a hush throughout the crowd.

“Repent.” He said. “It’s all about to change for the better for some of you and for the worse for the rest.

“If you think you’re ok, then you’re in for a rough ride. If you think that the world sucks, then smile, because your suffering is coming to an end.”

And here is where we need to leave the story for a minute. Is this man in gumboots a reasonably accurate modern day equivalent to John the Baptist? Or is that a bit fanciful? Tonight I thought we could reflect upon the message of John as found in Matthew 3 and see if it still works for today.

Lets read the passage.

The idea of a modern day John the Baptist type figure is something that is nice to entertain but it doesn’t quite work. For a start, how would a modern day prophet be recognisable? What would he really say? What hope for the future does our contemporary society hold? Is the man in gumboots the type of person we would really expect to be heralding the dawn of a new era in world history?

In 26 AD, John the Baptist was wearing the same stuff that Elijah and other great prophets of Israel wore. He was living a lifestyle of asceticism, of denying himself everything except that which he knew could sustain him—he was eating locusts and wild honey. He lived in the desert. If he were around today he would have been gathered up by our authorities and assessed for psychiatric illness. Helen Clarke would not

have considered him a threat in the same way that King Herod did. He would have remained insignificant and unimportant. He may have made the news in the Western Leader's "news in brief..." column.

John the Baptist was not someone that we would have recognised as being the forerunner to Jesus Christ's ministry. He was, in short, a freak.

What about his words? His message? "Repent" is an unpopular word. It implies that there is something wrong in someone's life, it comes across as being critical. The person who says it comes across as judgemental and unaccepting. "Just take me as I am..." is the modern day response. "This is who I am, take it or leave it"—becomes an excuse. To ask someone to change seems foreign to our idea of concept of identity. We are told to assume that everyone has it under control. The truth is that most of us don't have it under control and need to be reminded of that.

Repentance is about a change in attitude. It is a transformation in lifestyle. It is a re-orienting of our internal desires away from self-serving to God-serving.

And it is to me probably the most difficult thing in my Christian walk to work through, because it seems to ask too much of me, an imperfect being trying to engage with a perfect creator. How will I ever measure up?

But let's go back to the story...

"Repent," he said, "for the time for world peace is nearly here." And another ripple of realisation shuffled through the crowd.

"Take a good long hard look at yourself and I dare you to tell yourself what you see."

He looked at the clubbers. "The dance music that makes you feel good, that makes you want to dance all night is great! But it's also self-destructive if it helps you shy away from your pain. Dance, and keep dancing, but know the difference between a refuge and a prison."

He turned to the young 18 year old boy with eyes glaring vacantly into the nothingness of his surroundings. After popping an e, he was suddenly in love with everyone and everything.

"It's good to seek love, but if your only expression of love is the effect of a chemical, it is all in vain. You will tie yourself in emotional

knots. Love is an act of the will, not of a chemical. If you cannot choose to love, you cannot love. Turn your back on the drugs. Get real.

He turned to the ones who were wearing designer clothes. “I’ve seen you all staring at each labels and style. And I’ve seen you look down on those who aren’t wearing what you wear. You find worth in yourself and others by standards that other people dictate to you. You try to express your individuality by wearing stuff on the outside—you all look the same! You may look confident and act like you’ve got it together but your identity lies in labels and looking good. Turn from squandering your potential on petty things that cover up what’s going on inside and dare to be weak—for then you will find who your friends really are.”

“I know that some of you are going to Iraq to be a part of the human shield. But are you missing the point if you still hate people in your own country? International war is not the only war that is taking place. Turn from your hate and forgive those who have done wrong against you. World Peace runs deeper than no world wars.”

“I’m not kidding that world peace is at hand. Ready yourselves, because peace starts within you.”

And so he went on, dismantling everyone’s priorities with waves of divinely inspired common sense. He took the pride of humanity and tore it off them leaving their inner ugliness exposed. And he said,

“Let’s make you clean.”

Now the crowd had dispersed for many thought he was a joke—because cynicism and sarcasm are the easiest ways to look tough when being challenged— and a few had stayed behind. But those that did were treated to being a part of the world peace that he was talking about.

“Who are you?” they asked.

“I’m just a guy laying some groundwork for the next guy, and let me tell you something. He’s gonna blow your mind! I’m nothing compared to him. I’m not even worthy to clean his underwear.

Repentance. When the people heard John the Baptist talk about repentance and the kingdom of heaven, they had some kind of understanding about what these meant. They understood that the stuff that Isaiah had said in about the establishment of God’s rule over the all the earth, the reparation of the nation of Israel into one unit again in her promised land, the beginning of them getting the blessing of God. Listen to the stuff that Isaiah talks about: Isaiah 11.

6 The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.

7 The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

8 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

9 They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

This is quite extraordinary. Whenever *we* talk about this stuff we are talking about the future – because as far as we can see in the world around us, it hasn't happened. This utopia, this idealistic garden of peace that Isaiah is talking about is so far removed from our own existence that we have to put it into the future hope.

But when John the Baptist was speaking of the one who is to come (which is Jesus) and the kingdom of heaven, this is a huge part of the picture that people had in mind about what would actually happen. In the same way that many of us Christians have enormously high expectations of the second coming, the people of Jesus time had enormous expectations about his deliverance.

They didn't realise the full meaning of the words Kingdom of heaven though. They didn't realise that the kingdom of heaven required their participation. They didn't realise that freedom came at a cost. They didn't realise that in order to be free they had to die to self. In order to be free they had to repent. In order to be free they had to stop serving self and serve God.

World peace requires our participation in it at the micro level as well as the macro level. World peace requires our participation in our individual relationships as well as at the national level. The kingdom of heaven requires our participation in the world at an individual level as well as at the church level.

And so we return to the story:

After a good few months of this man proclaiming the same message, a church group that had been evangelising half way up Queen

Street came by to see who it was that was stealing all their thunder. What little crowd they had been getting in the past was now diminished and they had gone to see what was going on. They had read in the local rag about how some preaching guy at the bottom of Queen Street who was undergoing psychiatric treatment was bringing hundreds of people to change, and they went to find out what all the fuss was about.

They were thinking that they should find out if this guy was orthodox, if he was teaching the right stuff (which he probably wasn't because he was undergoing psychiatric treatment—he was obviously no more than an eccentric nutter). They went to silence him if he were leading people astray, or to support him if they thought it would help their cause and build up their number of converts. This church was full of good people who wanted to do good things.

And the chief evangelist shuffled to the front with his guitar slung around his shoulders and after listening for awhile enthusiastically applauded what was spoken. The rest of his group followed the example and applauded also. He went up to the man put his arm around him and said: "Tremendous stuff, my friend, tremendous stuff..." and then turning to the crowd exclaimed, "isn't he spectacular..." and as he was about to launch into an appeal, the man eased his way out of the half embrace to give a violent stare.

The stare became words...

"You snake!" and the crowd was astonished. "Do you really think that you are any better than the rest of these people? Do you really think that you can pull the wool over God's eyes? And the rest of your group are not much better!"

The smile on the evangelists face quickly turned ice cold. He stared very flatly at the man in gumboots. He couldn't believe what he was hearing.

The man in gumboots continued.

"Evangelism is good, being a committed church goer is good. But don't think for a moment that either of those activities makes up for the lack of honesty in your heart. Your ministry is a front! Don't for a moment be fooled into thinking that you can hide in the arms of the Christian church.

"Look around you. Your life is built around possessions too, you are no different, in fact you are worse because you are so much closer to

the truth. Your life is still centred around looking good and keeping up appearances. Your honesty suffers while your ego roams free.

“You too are not repentant. You too need to turn from your pretence. You too, you in your church group need to ...”

And perhaps I ought to stop there. Because it's too close to the bone for me. The challenge is too great and I run dangerously close to hypocrisy in preaching any further. Am I prepared to carry the burden of what follows in my own life — and my battle begins. Truth is a terrible thing to those who dare approach it. Freedom comes at a price.

Because...the kingdom of heaven is here and now. This is what Jesus started in his ministry on earth. John the Baptist reintroduced the Kingdom of Heaven concept. And Jesus took that idea that was so full of Jewish heritage and stripped away the unnecessary hopes and expectations. He built upon the bare bones of their understanding and taught them in his parables what the kingdom of heaven actually meant. And in his death and resurrection he began the new era. The era of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth.

We are living in this kingdom now. And in a nutshell we need to repent too!

The problem with the evangelist in the story was that he thought he had arrived because he was “an effective witness” and had a wonderful ministry. He had forgotten the process that he had entered into and he had forgotten that his success in Christian things can be self-serving. He had forgotten that he was needing to turn too.

When we embark on this journey of faith in Jesus we embark on a process of transformation. Yet I have so many questions, and so many doubts. Which is where God's grace comes in. God's grace provides balance to this story. God's grace actually embraces my uncertainty because it is directed to him. At a core level I know that though I often serve myself, I am overall oriented in the direction of Jesus. My life is dedicated as best that it can be to the grace of God. This means that everyday repentance is an act of the will and an embrace of God's grace. This is the way my journey works. How else will I survive? And my journey involves asking the difficult questions of myself. What motivates this, what motivates that. Why is that important to me, why is that not? But I ask the questions in the embrace of God's arms. There is my faith.

I think the only way forward is through honesty, honesty before God and honesty with ourselves—and they are both equally frightening. For through honesty we look weak. Through honesty we become vulnerable. Through honesty, we stand to lose all.

Repentance requires a terrible honesty because it requires we move from one place to another, that we engage in transformation. But before we embark on the transformation we need to confess what it is that we are transforming from, we need to realise what it is that needs to be turned from. Then we can move, then we can turn. Then we are set free, and then we cease being part of the problem and become part of the solution.

It is through repentance that we become a part of the kingdom of heaven and we start to see that in our weakness God's strength is shown.

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is here. Repent for the kingdom of heaven is enabled through brutal self-honesty. Repent, for the transformation of our lives depends upon it. Repent, for the transformation of our church depends upon it. Repent, for the transformation of our world is sourced in it.

Let us keep on turning from self-serving to Jesus-serving people.