

Matthew 3:1-12

3 In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea,² “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”³ For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said,

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord;
make his paths straight.’”

⁴ Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, ⁶ and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰ Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

¹¹ “I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”



Introduction

We are in Advent, a season of expectation and hope in God's promises for a new age. In the Gospel passage we have just heard, John the Baptist declares the coming of God's Kingdom in Jesus and then helps people process what that means in relation to their existing expectations and assumptions, in repentance and confession. He vigorously calls one particular group to deep repentance.

You may ask why John did this so vigorously.

To lead into this I want to use a set of drawings which have been around since the 1970s about what a customer orders and how that project then seems to develop. It's about the way expectations and assumptions confuse communication in collaborative projects.

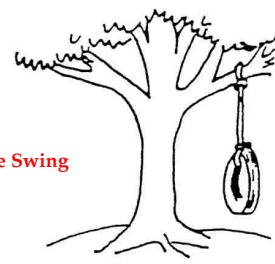
So at the risk of repeating a well known joke I'll screen it here with my own adapted captions:

In my version of the story, an elderly couple order the manufacture and installation of a backyard swing for their grandchildren.

This is what they had in mind as they placed an order with a large company.

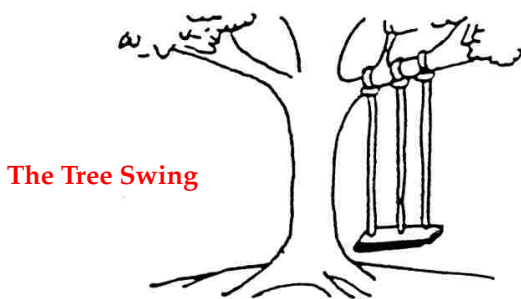
They were thinking of something safe and simple for their grandchildren of various ages to play on in the shade of their tree. Having placed their order they were told it would take a few days to draw-up, manufacture and install so they sat back with expectation and waited for their simple idea to become concrete reality as they had asked for.

However, unbeknown to the couple, the company they engaged was a big operation more used to very big projects with a lot of internal communication involving people with various skill sets. It was more like GM than their local garage! The slides tell the story of what developed:



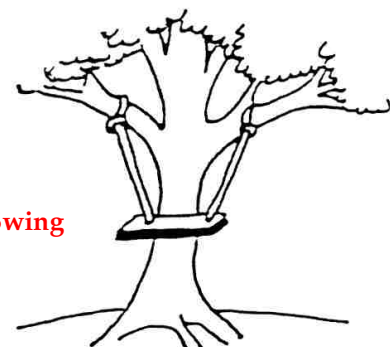
The Tree Swing

As ordered by the Customer



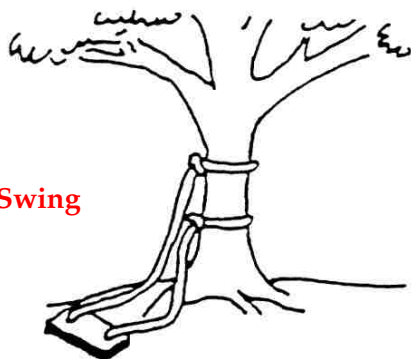
The Tree Swing

As was permitted for installation



The Tree Swing

As was manufactured



The Tree Swing

As Engineering tested it



The Tree Swing

As was installed on site

What happened??

The human result was two very surprised customers and confused grandchildren!

I suspect the reason this set of drawings keeps being referenced is that it rings a bit familiar to what actually sometimes happens? Each of the people involved in the swing production had different expectations and assumptions about the project they were involved in.

Expectations
and
Assumptions

We each live with all manner of unexamined and undeclared expectations. We listen and interpret through filters of assumption and experience. How are we to know that what others assume is not what we assume or what we assume is unfamiliar to others?

Inevitably we may also relate to God and other people out of our various expectations whether we are conscious of them or not. We hear the Gospel through our expectations and assumptions which can distort it's meaning to the extent we may place our faith in something that is somewhat of a misunderstanding of the Gospel.

As we progress in life, our expectations of God and people may well be surprised, disappointed or even crushed indicating that something of what we assumed and expected was out of tune or misplaced. If that becomes apparent it can be painful and we need to re-assess what we assume and expect. That can be really hard work, even scary with the risk of throwing the baby out with the bathwater!

Does this sound familiar?

God is real but one's faith may be mistaken.

Text



Today we heard the giant of Advent - John the Baptist - as he declared that the long expected coming of God's Kingdom into the life of Israel and the world was happening. Heaven's reign was at hand on earth. This was the gospel of John the Baptist.

He was saying to those in his day: “What we have long been expecting for is now present, its here.”

We are told a bit about John, what he wore and what he ate. He fitted the frame of Israel’s prophetic expectation. Some of Israel’s greatest prophets had not been smooth men. While Isaiah and Jeremiah were city boys with jobs in the Temple, Elijah, Amos and even Moses were men roughened and shaped by the great outdoors. John the Baptist conformed to that expectation of God speaking through men who lived rough and breathed words of fire.

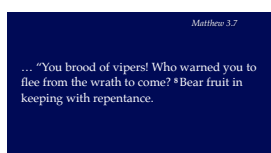
He was the first prophet in hundreds of years so many people went out to see him. His message was simple, Heaven is coming close so stop sinning, clean up your life and prepare for a new age under God’s Reign.

Many people responded to this through the baptism John provided as an enactment of their repentance and fresh commitment to clean living. John invites his listeners to be immersed (baptized) as an occasion for confession of sin, that is, naming and renouncing collaboration with the old age and preparing for the new age of the Kingdom of God. People came from the city and from the rural regions to hear and respond with this symbolic public washing. John was bringing a revival of faith and expectation in God.

All was going well until John challenged the religious leaders in the crowd, the Sadducees and Pharisees, as they expressed interest coming to be baptised!

In challenging them he challenged both the Pharisees – those who were like the extra keen evangelicals of their day - and the Saducees – more like the politically involved liberals of their day. He challenged them at the level of their expectations of God’s coming Kingdom for them as a privileged group.

This is core Advent business so I want to unpack what he said because it applies to us as well. John says to them:



... “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.

John had a clear perception of exactly who he was talking to and he let them know how he saw them and what needed attention. ‘You brood of vipers!’

Having got their attention he rips open their wrong thinking.

They too believed in the coming of God’s Kingdom and were very interested.

The problem was that their hope in God’s Kingdom was infected with their false expectations of God. They were not coming for baptism in repentant humility, wanting to change their behaviours to be in keeping with God’s Kingly rule, trusting in God’s grace. They thought they were doing the right thing already for a deserved and expected pay-off.

In their minds they were people for whom God’s Kingdom could only mean a favourable experience and positive outcome. God’s Kingdom coming was expected to mean a continuity and upward development of what they had worked hard to arrange for themselves here on earth as the pre-eminent leaders of God’s people.

John was calling this group to essential repentance and genuine faith. To do that he had to first dismantle their false expectations – sometimes you need to bowl and build. He was not just concerned about their complying with the 10 commandments and clean living but was also concerned with their belief system and their expectations of God for themselves. That was the level at which he sought real repentance. Change there and show the fruit of that!

John did not want a mere watery ritual to inoculate or distract them from the real issues of their twisted assumptions and false expectations concerning God. He was not going to allow them to play games of wishful thinking and feel good about it.

So with their attention in hand John deepens his critique of their expectations and makes specific the area where repentance was sought – their presumptive self-understanding as Jews forming the People of God. In this matter John goes for the jugular nerve:

Matthew 3:7
 ... ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?’ *Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.
 *And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.

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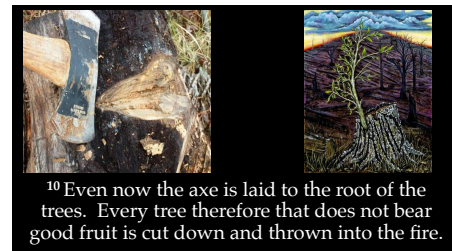
John is biting into the expectation that God favoured the descendants of Abraham so much that his Kingdom and its coming could only mean good things for them.

This group were the pre-eminent of Israel and probably had their genealogies carefully laid out so that the promises to Abraham could only multiply for them. Their paperwork was in order.

They had pulled God into their elitist expectations and John called them to repent of those presumptive and mistaken expectations of God. They were believing for something other than what God was promising. Their faith was twisted and the fruit was not good.

To illustrate that John picks up an image for Israel that we also heard about today from Isaiah (11.1) referred to as the stump of Jesse - one of many connections between this John and Isaiah.

It's the picture of Israel as a tree, the planting of the Lord in the land of God's provision. It's a tree that can regrow from its stump if it is cut down.



¹⁰ Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

The corporate image is now applied to the individual. This brutal image is seemingly designed to shatter the illusions of their expectations.

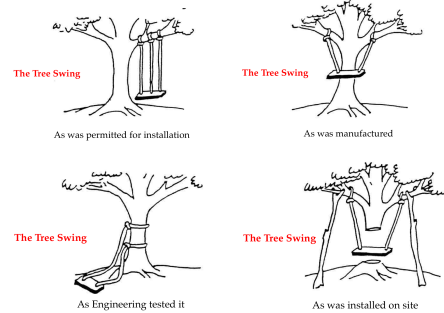
God the gardener has become God the forestry worker with chainsaw running, ready to cut the non fruit bearing tree! God is depicted as ready to judge people by pruning them at ground level!

The determining issue is whether the tree is bearing the fruit of repentance in accordance with God's Kingdom. Repentant lives bear good fruit. The presence of the axe dramatizes how critical this is.

So the message is: “Repent and you live another season, don’t show fruits thereof and you get the chop to allow a new growth from the roots.” Each generation of God’s people faces this process if it wants to be in tune with God’s Kingdom.

Part of the process is repenting of expectations that distort and poison faith in God’s Kingdom and his purposes for His people.

In terms of the Tree Swing we saw earlier it’s as if every competing image of what is expected needs to be let go of. Imagined features depart from the reality of the Kingdom. That repentance process can be hard work and not something for the casual believer.



Those who trust their human marks of success and status will resist repentance. We are all required to turn from the human things we trust. Repentance is harder for those more deeply invested in or comfortable with the current order of things, as were the Sadducees and Pharisees who came to observe John’s baptism, and as many of us are today.

I wonder how those people would receive a message like this in the face of the offense and confusion of the invested expectations involved. False hope can seem more helpful than no hope at all. People tend to know what they like and like what they know. Change is easily considered too unsettling and difficult. Having challenged wrong expectations and false assumptions, John ends by bringing new and raised expectations that are appropriate to the coming of the Kingdom and the One bringing it.

Matthew 3
 “I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. 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 gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

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God's Kingdom will come in One who on the basis of true repentance and faith will flood people with God's Holy Spirit and with Fire.

It's a double-edged promise. The Holy Spirit will bring God's life and the Fire of God will burn off what is unholy, impure, or in any way unfitting in God's Kingdom.

Fire is hot and consuming.

This is a promise of infilling blessing and the purge of judgement.

You will be spiritually blessed in God's Kingdom and your false expectations will be incinerated.

Those who receive the Holy Spirit will bear fruit and be harvested, those who do not will be burned as chaff.

That is what you can expect of God's Kingdom according to John the Baptist.

Application

So how do we hear John's message about the coming kingdom today and what expectations do we need to put aside. Where do we need to change our thinking and produce fruit of right behaviour.

A few expectations some might need to leave behind:

- God's Kingdom does not mean safe or risk free living.
 - John Wimber used to spell 'faith' as R-I-S-K.
 - Or as often quoted from CS Lewis' Narnia Chronicles about Aslan representing Christ, "He is not safe but he is good."
- God's Kingdom does not mean you can expect prosperity if you live a clean righteous life.
 - God's Kingdom doesn't do rewards and punishments like that.
- God's Kingdom does not mean you have to live in church mode and be pious 24/7 or keep ourselves separate from the world, or from those who don't follow Jesus in the way we do.

- God's Kingdom is not about a once-for-all saying sorry for sins and being forgiven and then – like the Pharisees and Saducees, having all the benefits in the bag.
- For Christians repentance is not a religious moment or experience in which we “come to God,” but then continue to live within the social stories and structures that make up life as usual.

Turning to the positive mode, St Paul said what The Kingdom is:

...the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking (*earthly prosperity*) but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. (Romans 14:17)

Conclusion

So we wait in expectation of the fulfilment of God's Kingdom while we produce the fruits of righteousness, peace, Joy in the Holy Spirit.

The root meaning of “to repent” is “to turn” or to have a dramatic change of mind and direction. To repent is turn away from the values and practices of the old age (e.g., idolatry, violence, injustice, quarrelling, selfish ambition, envy, greed, slander, etc) and to turn towards the values and practices of the Kingdom of God (typified by the qualities of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, peace, etc.).

In this context, repentance includes feeling sorry for one's personal sins, but it is much more. To repent is to take a clear-minded look at the ways in which one's life colludes with the assumptions and behaviors of the old age, to turn away from such complicity, and to turn towards God and the attitudes and actions of the Kingdom of heaven.

We choose to seek and receive God's Kingdom as promised because in some way we hear God call us to.

We trust and obey him because we choose to from what we have come to know about God.

It is his Spirit that sustains us in this and it is God's fire that refines our immature or wrongly held expectations.

In following Jesus we should have no illusions that it is difficult, very difficult. It's a journey of cross-shaped discipleship in the light of the resurrection. It is life with disappointments and trials studded with glory and wonder.

John offers us listeners a choice. We can repent, and join the movement toward the Kingdom, or we can continue to collude with the old age and face eternal condemnation at the final judgment. When we do not cooperate with God's purposes, we invite the consequences upon ourselves.

The choice is new in each generation and every day of our lives. Advent is a time we particularly make this choice central and consider carefully where we still need to change our expectations and assumptions, to repent by changing our minds, our hearts and our behaviours, to produce the fruit of repentance in our lives.

Let's take a moment now to let the Holy Spirit reveal to us what He will and then Francis will lead us in a time of confession.