

Matthew 3 sermon Tregear 21.2.2021

Remember back at Christmas time we started in on looking at Matthew's gospel. We read chapter 1&2 at Christmas. These first two chapters looked at the early life of Jesus – his birth and the first couple of years after that with the visit of the wise men or magi.

As we look at Matthew what questions are we asking? We are 400 to 500 years on from the exiles that we thought about in our last psalm. We are Jews, God's people, still under a foreign oppressor. The Greeks had come and ruled for some time; now the Romans rule.

Matthew, as the writer of this book, is one of Jesus' disciples. He's probably one of the most educated. He knew how to write. He had to as a tax collector. He had to write up accurate records of the payments made as taxes.

Questions we want to ask:

Matthew skips 28 years of Jesus' life – just the first couple of years and his last three years.

WHO IS THIS JESUS?? Matthew walked and ate and lived life close with him for three years. He observed him closely. He's not writing everything. His book takes up 48 pages in my Bible. That's like 2 chapters of a novel. It's nothing. George just read an 800 page novel for Book Club. So this is a condensation of many things that Jesus said and did. So what does Matthew include. As we look at Matthew through the rest of this year we want to ask ourselves the question, "why did Matthew include this part?" "What are we learning about Jesus?"

One of the things we notice is that there are constant references to Jesus being the Messiah – Matthew wants his own people, the Jews, to know that the Messiah promised throughout the Old Testament, has come. The prophecies in the OT have been fulfilled in Jesus. The Messiah has come!

Two other interesting things to note:

a) many references to the Old Testament – we'll see 2 of these in today's passage

b) there are 5 main teaching sections – in a couple of weeks time we'll start in on the first of these, what's often called the sermon on the mount in Matthew chapter 5. It's kinda like Matthew has put these in as key elements of Jesus' teaching and then he's structured the book around these 5 big speeches of Jesus, so look out for these.

So let's look at this passage. The main idea in this chapter is that the kingdom has come; the king has come – but the messenger and the king are not the kind of people we would expect and the message is not the kind of message we would expect

Matthew begins his account by introducing us to John – what he's doing? – preaching in the wilderness; he's the first prophet for 400 years. Notice the description of John – he has a very basic lifestyle, there are no pretensions with this guy – he doesn't hang around the Temple, but like the prophets in the Old Testament he's an outsider. Like Elijah he's out in the desert. I'm intrigued by the details Matthew includes about his food, clothing and home. It's as if he's saying this was a true prophet, look at the way he lived. He was totally committed to God and the message God had given him. Many people come to John in the desert, it's like a revival time; they confess their sins, and are baptized; his words, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come" – is a quote from Isaiah 40:3 – a voice of one calling in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the Lord. Get ready for him; make straight paths for him.

This is the key message he is giving. If Scott Morrison or Gladys said, "Hey Dave I want to come to your house tonight". We'd tidy up the house, make sure the yard was clean, the lawn mown. We'd be getting ourselves ready. John's message is the same. The king is coming, the Messiah is coming – get ready. And the way to get ready is to repent.

So people came and were baptized. This would have been a real slap in the face to many Jews. This ceremony of baptism was like something a Gentile administered to themselves (along with circumcision and a special sacrifice) when they wanted to become a Jew. John used it to tell the Jews that they needed to be baptized into the people of God too, because their national identity was not enough to save them. What was more they could not even do this to themselves in private, but needed to come to him in public and admit their need for forgiveness, salvation, and a new start in God.

This message was offensive to the Pharisees and Sadducees who had come along to watch and see what John was doing, in v. 7. There was no way they were going to do baptism. I mean they were good people. They followed the law better than most people and they were Jews so they were ok with God – or so they thought.

What does John say to them in v.7-10? You guys are like snakes. You think you're righteous!!?? And you've done enough to ward off God's judgement? No way guys!!! You need to repent; you need to show that it's genuine repentance by showing fruit in your lives, ie changed lives. It's not enough to say Abraham is our Father; ie that we are Jews. That means nothing; God could make these stones Jews if he wanted, if that's all that was needed. No what is needed is repentance; an unconditional surrender to God. To admit you need God. Your problem is you think you can live a religious life without God.

REPENTANCE – what does it mean to repent? Well, we’ve already said that it is unconditionally surrendering to God, acknowledging that he is king. Admitting we have gone the wrong way. It’s a 180 degree turn around.

Someone has said, “Sin is the refusal to let God be God. Repentance is letting God be God in our lives.”

I think one of the most dangerous things I say to myself is, “Oh it’s only a little thing. It’s not too bad. Yes, I did speak rudely to my wife. Yes, I did take that equipment that belonged to the company. Yes, I did linger over those pictures on that website that was not helpful. Yes, I did act selfishly in not contacting my friend.” Oh, but they’re only little things. I’m pretty good really. Remember what sin is: Sin is the refusal to let God be God. Repentance is letting God be God in our lives.

John Owen, the great Puritan writer said many years ago: “Be killing sin or it will be killing you.” We need to fight sin. Sin is serious. As John Owen said, if we are not fighting it then it is killing us. You can’t sit on the fence with sin. It’s like this. If an electric garage door were about to crush your child you would hold it up with all your might and shout out for help and then you would hold it, hold it, hold it hold it. You would fight to keep your child from injury and death. This needs to be our attitude towards sin.

There are two attitudes we need to have. One is to treat sin seriously; the other is to remember that once I’ve repented God forgives me and does not count the sin against me. God knows that we will fail; that we will sin again. But God does not sit there saying, “ Oh Dave. You’ve done it again. Fix yourself up. You rotten sinner.” God does not condemn us in this way. God longs for us to come running to him, to admit our sin and to receive his forgiveness. He welcomes us with open arms.

My friends, if any of you have come here this morning and you think that just by coming in this building that that makes you right with God you need to listen to John’s words. Don’t be like the Pharisees and Sadducees and think that you are right because you are in the right place or you have done enough good things yourself. The only way, THE ONLY WAY we can be right with God is to repent, acknowledge our need for God to forgive us and save us and that he is the King. If you’re not sure what that means talk to me or someone else here afterwards. It’s the most important thing you’ll do today.

Back to John and his words in v.10. They’re fiery words aren’t they!! And a very powerful image – the tree that is not producing fruit, because they are not admitting they need to repent and are too proud to submit to God, they’ll be chopped down.

v.11-12 John now turns to telling us about the king who is coming. And these, too, are strong words.

John baptizes with water for repentance. But what is this king like – a) he is more powerful than I am; in fact, I, even as a servant, can't carry his sandals. This king is really powerful!! b) I baptized with water but he will do something far more significant, he will baptize with Holy Spirit and fire. John's baptism was symbolic – it didn't make the people new but it indicated an inner change of heart. The Messiah's baptism however, would be a true cleansing, a cleansing that would make us holy in God's eyes. Fire is something that cleanses but it also destroys – it would destroy all that was worthless. Only the King could give us that true cleansing; his death on the cross would rescue us and then the filling of the Holy Spirit would enable us to live as his true people.

And then there are these surprising words, words we don't want to hear. The king will be a king who will judge and destroy. Yes there will be a judgement – and this should make us run to the one who is King. Repent is the message of John. Get ready for the King.

God uses a man from the back blocks, who dresses weird, eats weird, and has an unattractive message. Couldn't the Messiah get a better PR person?

And then Jesus comes and puts himself under the authority of this man, John. He gets baptised by John.

But Jesus surprises us doesn't he? After the big build-up by John you'd be thinking – Ok, the great leader is about to come, there'll be great explosions, a blaze of light and colour, powerful acts to display his glory. But we get Jesus, meekly submitting to baptism. He's endorsing or recommending John. Yes, you need to listen to the message of this man. He doesn't need it!! He hasn't sinned all his life! But Jesus says I must do this to fulfil God's promises that he made all through the Old Testament. Yes, these are promises that will blow God's wind, God's spirit, through the world, which will bring the fire of God's just judgement on evil wherever it occurs, and which will rescue God's repenting people once for all from every kind of exile to which they have been driven. But if he, Jesus, is to do all this, this is how he must do it, by humbly identifying himself with God's people, by taking their place, sharing their penitence, living their life and ultimately dying their death.

What good will this do? And how will it bring about the result that John – and his audience – were longing for?

To those questions, Matthew's full answer is: read the rest of the story. But we can glimpse what that answer will be when Jesus comes up out of the water. Israel came through the water of the Red Sea and was given the law, confirming their status as God's son, God's

firstborn. Jesus came up from the water of baptism and received God's spirit, God's wind, God's breath, in a new way, declaring him to be God's son, Israel-in-person. Someone has said the dove which for a moment embodies or represents the Holy Spirit, indicates that the coming judgment will not be achieved through a warlike or vindictive spirit, but will mean the making of peace. Judgment itself is judged by this spirit, just as Jesus will at last take the judgement upon himself and make an end of it. What an incredible truth! God himself will take our judgement. BUT, BUT only if we repent. If we refuse to surrender to God's kingly rule we have much to fear – because we take on ourselves the judgement.

Remember Rod's words last week – God is sovereign and surprising. This is a surprising passage as we begin the ministry of Jesus. Part of the challenge of this passage is to learn afresh to be surprised by Jesus. He comes to fulfil God's plans, not ours, and even his prophets sometimes seem to misunderstand what he's up to. He will not always play the music we expect. But if we learn to listen carefully to what he says, and watch carefully what he does, we will find that our real longings, the hunger beneath the surface excitement, will be richly met. That same voice that speaks to Jesus speaks to us as well, those who have repented and been welcomed into God's family. We have a loving Father who affirms us, equips us with his Spirit so that our lives might be swept clean and made ready for use. Let's cooperate with the Father as he does that.