

4 December 2022

Isaiah 11:1-10
Romans 15:4-13
Matthew 3:1-12

The recent announcement that Donald Trump intends to contest the 2024 US presidential election brought back memories of how, throughout 1996, we watched incredulous as the election campaign rolled on, ultimately leading to Trump's election. At the time many of us wondered (and still wonder): what was the appeal? Why are people attracted to him in such vast numbers? And why do so many people listen so attentively to what he has to say and read what he tweets?

I find myself wondering the same about John the Baptist.¹ Here's this fellow out in the wilderness of Judea, the dry barren country that runs from near where the Jordan enters the Dead Sea south along the western shores of the Dead Sea to around about Masada. John is clothed in a garment made of camel hair – coarse, hard-wearing fibre more often used for making tents, carpets, and cloaks – secured around his waist with a leather belt. He feeds on locusts (grasshoppers) and wild honey. He's hardly an attractive figure in the usual sense!

So why did so many people go out into the wilderness to hear him shouting at them, telling them to change their ways? Why did they undergo baptism at John's behest? What was the attraction?

John's message was 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' It is this message that holds the key to the attraction.

We're so far away from John's time and so disconnected from our roots in Abraham's descendants that we tend to hear "kingdom of heaven" in ways that are much more influenced by contemporary concerns – limiting it to ideas of salvation or justice, for example. To understand John the Baptist's appeal, we need to understand what "kingdom of heaven" meant to a first century Jew.

¹ Chesser

The first thing is to understand that “kingdom of heaven” means exactly the same thing as “kingdom of God”. “Kingdom of heaven” is just Matthew’s preferred way of saying “kingdom of God”, following a common Jewish practice. Using the word “heaven” isn’t supposed to make us think automatically of some place other than planet earth and or of some time other than the present.

When John (or indeed Jesus) said “The kingdom of heaven (or the kingdom of God) has drawn near”, what do you think his hearers would have thought about?

First of all, a kingdom is a people governed by a king: kingdom refers to a people; to a people ruled; and to a people ruled by a king.²

Naturally enough then, when John talked about “the kingdom”, those listening would have heard him talking about Israel – a people, *their* people.

And to talk about the people Israel in this way, was to talk about who was ruling them.

Their model king had been King David. He was understood to have been ruling on God’s behalf – a king ruling under the world’s true king.

So when people like John talked about the “kingdom of heaven” or “the kingdom of God” the minds of the people would immediately go back to that significant time in Israel’s history, a time when they were a people ruled by one of their own, a king under God’s ultimate authority exercising God’s kingly rule.

But what was the actual situation in the time of John the Baptist? They were a people occupied by an enemy nation – Rome. The various regions of what had once been ruled by King David were now ruled by various sons of Herod, who were not regarded as Jewish. And in any case, these regions were in fact client states of Rome and ultimate rule – through the Roman governor – went back to the Emperor (at that time, Tiberius). Rome was a thoroughly pagan nation, worshipping all manner of gods. The worship of the emperor as divine also started to develop around this time.

So against this background, someone with a message that “the kingdom of heaven has drawn near” would certainly attract an audience. People sick of Rome and its

² McKnight, p. 74.

oppressive regime, people longing for a return to the golden age in which Israel was a nation under its own God-given and godly king, people longing for peace, and justice, and salvation ... these people would flock to one declaring that “the kingdom of heaven has drawn near”.

These are people longing for the Messiah, looking for the anointed one who will fulfil the ancient prophecies of a time when a new godly ruler would rise up. Isaiah’s vision in the first reading this morning reflected that longing.

So we should be able to understand why the people would go in numbers out into the wilderness to John: his message is compelling, and keys into these long-held hopes.

But there is another element to the puzzle. Because the message is not simply “the kingdom of heaven has come near”; the message is “*Repent*, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Now that’s not sounding so attractive anymore! Maybe about as attractive as a dentist crying out “Come in, and I’ll extract all your teeth without anaesthesia!”

“Repent!” is not such an instantly attractive message. But nevertheless the people respond – repenting, confessing their sins, and being baptised. Why?

The reason is that kingdom not only implies a king, a rule, a land, and a people; it also implies a law.³ And the law of the kingdom of heaven has its foundation in the *Shema*, the command to love God alone with all the heart, soul, and strength. In many places in the Hebrew scriptures (our Old Testament), there is a strong sense that repentance was what Israel must do if her exile is to come to an end.⁴

For example they would remember Jeremiah 3:

“Return, faithless Israel,” declares the LORD,
“I will frown on you no longer,
for I am faithful,” declares the LORD,
“I will not be angry for ever.

³ McKnight, pp. 74, 76.

⁴ Wright, *JVG*, pp.248-249

¹³ Only acknowledge your guilt –
you have rebelled against the LORD your God,
you have scattered your favours to foreign gods
under every spreading tree,
and have not obeyed me,”
declares the LORD.

So the people go out into the wilderness to hear this message that the kingdom of heaven has drawn near, the message that they should repent. And they go because they long to hear this message, this good news, that God is about to act to redeem his people, to once again establish his kingdom in their midst. They go to repent, because they understand that they have a role to play in God establishing his kingdom – and their role is the act of repenting.

To repent, as you have no doubt heard before, is to turn. It is not just a turn *from* sin – “I will try not to be naughty again”. It is, more importantly, a turn away from all false gods and *to* the one true God, a turn from those who claim to rule and *to* the world’s true ruler.

And all this is symbolised in baptism in the Jordan. Why?

There are several potential layers of meaning.⁵ It could be connected to the ritual washing away of sin. It could be modelled on pattern of proselyte baptism in which Gentile converts were received into Judaism, in which case it was a profound symbol of how far those undergoing it felt that had strayed from the path of true devotion. Lastly the fact that it took place in the Jordan could symbolise once again coming through the waters into the Promised Land. It is the return from exile, the return to the land – not just that specific piece of geography but the sense of a return from exile to the land now containing a particular people (the people of God), under a particular king (God the Almighty).

A thousand years before the people had gone through the waters of the Jordan to conquer the land. Now they do it again, as a sign they were getting ready for a great

⁵ Osborne offers some discussion on the options, see p. 112. On the coming through the Jordan symbol, see Wright, *Matthew*, p. 18

conquest, God's defeat of all evil and the establishment of his kingdom on earth as in heaven.⁶

The kingdom of heaven has come near in the person of Jesus: he is the embodiment of the kingdom – God in the flesh; the Messiah, the one anointed by God to rule on God's behalf – and he comes to call a kingdom people into being.

But what is the identifying mark of this people? No longer can they be defined by ethnicity (a point of which Paul was to make much in his letter to the Romans).

Confidence in ancestry doesn't cut the mustard anymore. "We have Abraham as our father," they would say to themselves, meaning "God made promises to Abraham; we are his children; therefore God is committed to us, and we are bound to be all right in the end."⁷ But the issue is that if the children of Abraham have rejected God's Messiah, God's king, then they have defined themselves out of the kingdom. And they suffer the consequences.

And it is not just the old Jew vs Gentile thing that matters here. Any form of tribalism flies in the face of the oneness of God and his calling into being a people, a united people, for himself.⁸

But all this is not a message that is solely happiness and joy. It is a message that contains a searing challenge, and it is one we can get a bit uncomfortable with if we play it forward into our own time. We tend to downplay judgement, and images like the axe chopping at the root of the branch and chaff being separated out to be burned in an unquenchable fire are very confronting. Squeamishly we prefer a message where judgement falls on no-one at all, ... or maybe only on the very very worst – the Hitlers and Pol Pots and the like perhaps.

But think of it this way. We long for justice to be done. We long for the kind of peace and harmony conveyed in the lovely picture language of Isaiah, in which the wolf will live with the lamb, and so on. But if that justice and peace is to come about, something has to be done about injustice and war and unforgiveness and enmity. It has to be cleaned out and destroyed. If God really is God Almighty, creator of all

⁶ Wright, *Matthew*, p.18.

⁷ Wright, *Matthew*, p.18

⁸ Prompted by Kirk.

and the world's true ruler, then when God comes back shouldn't we expect that he will demand absolute allegiance? If God really is God, he isn't simply the kindly, indulgent, easy-going parent we sometimes imagine.⁹ When we do not cooperate with God's purposes, we invite the consequences upon ourselves.¹⁰

Remember though – those stern words are actually good news. They are good news to those who long for justice and peace and joy. The God who came to his people in Jesus will one day unveil his kingdom in all its glory, bringing justice and joy to the whole world. Our earthly leaders are not going to do it, no matter what their persuasion – the fallenness of the world and the fallenness of its systems (political, economic, social etc), make it humanly impossible regardless of how good and committed our leaders might be. Politics is a highly ambiguous and clearly fallen space.

Whether or not we involve ourselves in the elections of the political systems of the place and age in which we live – making choices between the Trumps and Bidens of this world – as important as those kinds of choices are, there is an ultimate choice we must all make. The most important choice we face over and over again is the choice of our ultimate allegiance – who will we have rule us?

The good news is that the God who came to his people in Jesus will one day unveil his kingdom in all its glory, bringing justice and joy to the whole world.¹¹

How can we get ready for that day?

Where do the roads need straightening out?

What fires need to be lit in our life together to burn away the rubbish in his path?

Which dead trees will need to be cut down?

Who needs to be summoned to repent?

And where in our own lives do we need to turn again to the King?

⁹ Wright, *Matthew*, p.19.

¹⁰ Allen

¹¹ Wright, *Matthew*, p.19.

Sources:

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