

## [Luke 3:7-18](#)

A favourite story I like to tell about the birth of our son concerns the first time we took him as a baby to one of the churches I was serving. One man looked at him, then looked at me, and said: “Don’t you ever bring a paternity suit against your wife over this lad, because the judge will take one look at him, then one look at you, and laugh the case out of court.”

Even now, seventeen years later, you can see the physical resemblance. You would do all the more if you’d known me at that age. We may have different colour hair, but his hair colour comes through from my father’s side of my family. He is a mathematician, as I was. He is blue-eyed, like me. He is left-handed, as I am – albeit that he is more like my father, who was a relatively ambidextrous left-hander, whereas I am much more left-handed. Like my father, he has an excellent sense of direction and is extremely good at navigating with maps.

But he won’t make his way in life based on whose son and grandson he is. That will depend more on how he uses his gifts, talents, and opportunities.

And John the Baptist is trying to get over something similar to his hearers in our passage today. He tells people who claim they are the offspring of Abraham that they are more like the offspring of snakes. You can have all the religious heritage you like, he says, but it counts for nothing if you’re not living a transformed life. Being raised in the Jewish faith won’t count for anything on its own. Being baptised won’t mean diddly-squat unless your life changes. (Verses 7-9)

It’s something that is painfully relevant to some of the pastoral conversations I have when I first meet people in Methodist churches. It’s not uncommon for people to tell me how they’ve been a Methodist for decades, maybe all their lives.

And I wonder, why is that the first thing they want to tell me about themselves? Because it won’t count for anything with Jesus – unless, of course, they are faithfully living according to the life-changing teaching and spiritual experience that John Wesley underwent and then taught to others.

So you were baptised a Methodist? Well, big deal. Actually, nobody is baptised a Methodist, they are baptised into the Christian faith.

But if you were brought to church as an infant and a minister poured water on your head in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, then it doesn't matter one bit that the Methodist Church says that any administration of water in the name of the Trinity is a valid baptism, because John the Baptist says that baptism only matters if you go on to lead a baptised life.

So enough of all this claiming of a religious heritage as if it's a ticket to heaven. It's nothing of the sort. Presenting your baptism certificate will not work in the way that showing your passport does at Immigration Control in a new country. All that God accepts as the passport to glory is a life of repentance and faith, a baptised life more than a baptised body.

If you want to come to a minister and start telling us that you've been a Methodist for fifty years, then make sure you're actually living as a Methodist in the sense John Wesley taught. Make sure that you come to God not dependent on your own good works, but by faith in Jesus who died for you. Be thankful for his forgiveness and show it by your love for God and for other people. After all, Wesley was fond of quoting from Galatians: 'The only thing that counts is faith working through love.' Seek a constant renewing and reordering of your life, joining a small group of other Christians where you each hold one another accountable. Be generous and have a concern for the poor. Share your faith with others.

If you think that's a bit strong, look at what John the Baptist required of the people who came to him for baptism. They were to share with the poor, not cheat, be truthful, and avoid greed. That wouldn't be a bad starting place today, either! (Verses 10-14)

And if that's the sort of person you are, then I'm highly likely to believe that you're a traditional Methodist! That would show the kind of spiritual DNA that Wesley wanted to see replicated in people.

But if all you can do is wave a baptism certificate or produce your latest membership ticket with a flourish, well, John Wesley would have had harsh words for you and so too would John the Baptist. Both of them would have warned you about the judgement that Jesus will bring.

And so John talks about how Jesus the Messiah will come to baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire – with fire being an image of judgement. He talks about how he will separate the wheat into the barn but burn up the chaff with

unquenchable fire. It's a challenging and powerful description of Jesus. (Verses 15-17)

Of course, some people won't have it. They will say, that can't be Jesus, he was all about telling us to love one another. Well he was about teaching us to love, but he also had strong words for those who would not love. He had particularly harsh words for those who used their religion for their own power or to put others down. Jesus was absolutely clear in his teaching that if you claim to be a disciple of his, then it needs to be seen in the way you live.

So all the people who call him 'Lord, Lord' but don't do his bidding will have a shock. All the people who can't be bothered to be prepared for his coming like the five foolish virgins in the parable will find that their future is not what they complacently assumed.

I have to ask myself, how am I preparing for the coming of Jesus? Not in the sense of, have I bought all the presents I should for Christmas, but in the sense of, am I adjusting my life to make it more fit for the arrival of the One who is King of Kings and Lord of Lords?

Do you ask yourself the same sort of question? Because we all need to do so.

This is why historically Advent has not been a time for feasting on mince pies but rather a season of penitence, like Lent. Preparing for the coming of the Messiah is a challenging matter.

But Jesus does come with the Holy Spirit. We are not left with only our own feeble power to alter our lives. When Jesus challenges us, he also provides the strength we need to make those changes. And we find that ability and energy in the gift of the Holy Spirit.

I want to conclude by saying that all week the ending of the reading has puzzled me.

<sup>18</sup> And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.

Good news? It doesn't much sound like good news, does it, all this fire and brimstone preaching?

But it is good news. It is good news in the ancient sense, in the way the term 'good news' would have been used in the Roman Empire. When a Roman herald arrived in a place and said he was going to proclaim good news, it would

be the announcement that there was a new Emperor, or that the armies of Rome had won a great battle against an enemy.

In that respect this is good news. It is the news that the kingdom of God is arriving in the person of the King himself, Jesus. It will later become the news that the king himself has won the greatest battle of all on the Cross against all the forces of evil. And it is the good news that in the reign of King Jesus he brings love, justice, reconciliation, harmony, healing, and much more.

Therefore when we are challenged to repent and to reorder our lives, the call is to bring our lives into step with the kingdom of God – that is, to be loving, to pursue justice, to work for reconciliation, to bring harmony, to exercise healing, and so on.

If we are to prepare for the coming of Christ, then this is the kind of life to which we are called.