



The first house Becs and I lived in in Birmingham had a major problem. No matter what I did with draught excluders and the like, we couldn't get the temperature above 15 degrees in the winter. The root problem was that the ancient boiler was not up to the job. You can't just put insulation on a pipe and expect it to produce hot water. Similarly, if you do not have faith in Jesus Christ you can not produce good fruit. Good fruit is produced "in keeping with repentance" (v8)

This passage starts with a list of high-flyers (which incidentally gives this event a time-stamp in history, about AD29) who are evil, self-indulgent political and religious leaders in power at that time and we recognise their names because of their direct role in the crucifixion of Jesus. The word of God didn't come to the most important people in the land, it came to the miracle child of Elizabetha and Zechariah: John, the bloke living in the wilderness. Those holding the reins of power do not dominate the course of history. "Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" (1Cor 1:20) God controls the world. It gives us hope because of what is going on in the world today. In AD 29 Tiberius was emperor but God was speaking to John. In 2026 Kier Stammer is Prime Minister, Musk is the richest man and Trump is president of the USA. And where is God speaking? He is speaking to his people in faithful churches all around the world. The happenings on the global stage is alarming but we also know who has the authority and he is speaking through his word to his people. Are we listening or are we caught up in status, social standing and stuff? We know a lot about a nobody in the wilderness and next to nothing about the second emperor of the Roman Empire. We need to heed John's wakeup call. Hierarchy will not save you. Status will not give you security. Religious position will not even help save you. Being part of the Jewish family is a good thing but it is not **the** thing. Don't rely on your heritage like having Abraham as your father. How do you think of yourself as you come into church? What do you look to for your strength and security here in church? Your security cannot be in your role as elder or deacon, your longevity or number of friends. Repent and believe in Jesus and produce fruit in keeping with repentance and because of God's work in you, you have eternal life. Think of yourself in terms of being a child of God and a follower of Jesus. We are his and he is ours. Where is your faith? John exposed the hearts of his hearers. "Every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down." John's message demands a heart-response. Let the word of God challenge and change you and you will ask, "What shall we do?" (v10).

True repentance leads to physical signs of faith. "Anyone who has 2 shirts should share with the one who has none and anyone who has food should do the same." It's been said that if you can't give something away then you don't own it, it owns you. John does not say, "If you have a wardrobe full of clothes then give some away." If you have 2 shirts (not many) then give one away. This goes beyond the teaching about giving in proportion to what you have. We should be sacrificially generous. Simply, if you've got food (not a lot) share with those who have none. We are called to be sensitive to the economic gap: those who have

much and those who have little. Do something about those who have little. Surrender your false securities and remain dependent on God. Real faith will be evident in our bank balance, our house and our time. They will be marked by a shared life. This is the ordinary, normal Christian life. When the tax collectors came and asked, "What shall we do?" (v12) John didn't tell them to find a different job, he told them not to collect more than they were required to. Do your work in a way that honours and glorifies God. A changed life is in the office, at home, in every area of your life.

On Friday, I was walking through Birmingham when someone came up to me and asked for some money. I just walked straight by. We have to be discerning but actually, I'd written this sermon by then and here I am saying this is an ordinary, everyday thing. And here I am having to repent that I didn't live how I should have lived, so Lord help me to do better. I want to encourage you to acknowledge your shortcomings and seek God's grace to do better. Where is your faith? The way you see yourself will proclaim where your faith is.

We get a window onto John's high view of Jesus. "I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." (v15) John is all about the Messiah. He is not about building himself a reputation. No one who is looking for status would address his hearers as "a brood of vipers". He was "A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all people will see God's salvation.'" John wanted people to see God's salvation. His faith was in the Messiah. Let your faith build a road where the rocks are removed and crooked ways are straightened out in joy and holiness. Wake up and see this is serious. This is no game. Don't rely on your stuff, your position, your ancestors. Don't sit in your pews thinking you are saved by what you have or who you are. John is not looking to baptise as many as he can, he is after real change, heart-felt repentance. "The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." (v9) What good is it if you spend our life trying to look like a really holy Christian if you do not believe in Christ? Who are you kidding? You need a heart change so it bubbles out into a life change.

Repentance is turning away from sin and idolatry and towards God in love. It results in a change of attitude, a new relationship with God and others. There is a change inside and out. Repentance is not a one-time thing; it is the Christian walk, a daily turning your life towards the will of God and grieving over the way you've been and asking God to continue working in you so you produce good fruit in keeping with repentance. This is a message for us all including myself as well. John was preparing the way for Jesus. He shook people awake to repentance and then baptism. We baptise people because of their faith in Jesus and their faith in Jesus is shown by the fruit in their life. If there is no fruit the likelihood is the confession is not real. If you continue in sin, if the crooked road is not being made straight then that is a matter for concern. Baptism is a matter of obedience. The call to be baptised is very clear. If you are a believer and haven't been baptised come and see me. I'd love to discuss baptism with you. John proclaimed the truth to all people but there were hard repercussions. "But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of his marriage to Herodias, his brother's wife, and all the other evil things he had done, Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison." (v9) This is the suffering nature of God's people. It is the taking up of the cross of the Christian faith. Where is your faith? If it's in Jesus he will change everything and you will be free give generously, to work faithfully, free from sin, free from the fear of man and willing to proclaim the gospel to all even those who would punch you down. Where is your faith?