

[Matthew 3:1-12](#)

I had always thought that the parent I most resembled was my father. Temperament, build, hair colour, interests – not identical, but pretty similar.

It was therefore a surprise when I went into a room in the office where I began my working life to find there a woman called Olive say, “You must be Joan Faulkner’s son! You look so like her.” It turned out Olive had worked with my mum many years previously.

Who are you like? Sometimes I approach a Bible passage like that. Which of the characters are we like, and what does that tell us about our faith?

And I want to take that line with today’s passage. Who am I like in the reading? Who are *you* like?

Are we like *John the Baptist*?

I don’t know how many times I’ve read this story during my life, but what I do know is that when I came to it this week my first reaction was, ‘Yes, I identify with John the Baptist!’

Why? Because I like locusts and honey? No. Because I want to wear something made from camel’s hair? No: I just ordered a new winter coat from Mountain Warehouse in a Black Friday deal.

It was the line about being ‘one calling in the wilderness’ (verse 3). And the word ‘wilderness’ grabbed me. I thought, that’s what my ministry is like. Much of the time I haven’t seen the things I’d have hoped for, and much of the Methodist Church feels as parched as the wilderness. Woe is me!

But then I dug deeper instead of feeling sorry for myself. I thought of what the wilderness symbolises in the Scriptures. One thing it symbolises is ‘testing’, just as God tested the faithfulness of Israel in the wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land.

And so I wondered whether a prolonged period of spiritual drought was one where my faithfulness to God was being tested. Furthermore, I wondered about the drought the Christian church finds itself in, as evidenced by the substantial [fall in the numbers of people calling themselves Christians](#), as we have learned this week the 2021 Census data shows.

But then perhaps we are being tested by God to see whether we will be faithful to him in disappointing circumstances. The temptation at a time of

decline is to start adjusting our message to fit what people popularly believe, but that is a serious mistake. For one thing, it means we won't be faithful to Christ even when it means we are unpopular. For another it's a tactical mistake, because if we make ourselves just like the rest of the society then there is no longer any point in conversion.

The Anglican evangelist J John [put it like this](#) in response to the census figures:

In my view, and I claim the Bible on my side, what is needed is not a stripped-down creed tuned to the prevailing mood of the culture.

That won't work: no one goes to church to hear exactly what they get from the media and from their friends and colleagues. What will bring them in and see them committed to the church is the full-blooded, confident preaching of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Paradoxically the way to change the census figures is to ignore them and instead focus on producing changed lives through Jesus Christ.

But the wilderness is also the place of renewal. God promises to bring his people back from exile in Babylon through the wilderness to their land. So it's fitting that John locates his campaign for the renewal of Israel in the wilderness. So as we witness more and more decline and death in the British church, we also pray, Lord, turn this wilderness into a place of renewal and growth.

Meanwhile, what do we do? We trust in God. This is what the locusts and honey are about. They are not a description of a bush tucker trial from I'm A Celebrity, Get Me Out Of Here, they were the basic foods available to him if living simply in the desert. Honey was a regular sweetener for the poor and for others in his culture; other wilderness-dwellers often fed on locusts¹. Just don't go looking for them among the more unusual foodstuffs at Waitrose. John was saying, I am willing to live simply and live on what God provides here.

How willing are we like him to trust God like that?

Or are we like *the crowds*?

It isn't difficult for the people to go and hear John. His location is just twenty miles from Jerusalem. The Jewish historian Josephus tells us that the crowds

were so large that Herod Antipas, the local ruler on behalf of the Romans, feared an uprising².

But if it was easy for them to get there, it wasn't so easy for them to fulfil what John was calling them to do. He preached that they needed to repent (verse 2), and here 'repentance' doesn't merely mean 'change your mind', it means 'turn your whole life around'. We see them doing this because Matthew tells us that they were baptised by John when they confessed their sins (verse 6).

Let us pause and consider what a humbling thing this was for the average Jew to do. John was not asking them to follow through simply with a liturgical, ritual act. He was expecting a complete change of lifestyle.

But he is expecting this from devout Jews! These are people who are already committed to faith in God! John is saying to them, you might just as well be a pagan Gentile, such is the level of turnaround you need in your lives. They were being treated as if they had never demonstrated any serious commitment to God at all before, despite having followed the Jewish way of life and taken part in its rituals for years!

I gained a small insight into what that must feel like many years ago. As a good number of you know, when I was exploring God's call to the ministry, I ended up studying Theology as an independent student at an Anglican theological college. When the calling became clear, I had a quandary. Did I stay with my native Methodism or did I go over to the Church of England, because I was seeing a great advert for it there?

It was that thought that I would have to be confirmed just like I had never been a Christian before that ultimately put me off the C of E. To me, it denied the previous work of the Holy Spirit.

Now what if I or some other preacher told you that all your Methodist heritage was in vain in terms of getting into God's Kingdom? Just because you were a church steward for many years didn't count. Just because you knew Wesley's hymns inside out meant nothing. Just because you had taught Sunday School or been a Local Preacher – well, so what?

Rip it all up and start again. That's what John expected of the crowds. What if we need to do that? What if all that we do, much as we cherish it, has declined into empty ritual and dead religion? Do any of us need to hear John's call for a

radical turning back to Christ and a complete reset of our spiritual lives? Does anyone hearing this today need to do that?

Or finally, are we like *the Pharisees and Sadducees*?

Well, if you thought John was hard on the ordinary crowds, just wait until you hear him tear into the religious leaders. A 'brood of vipers' (verse 7): That is an ancient insult! There was a belief that had been around for a few centuries going back to the Greek historian Herodotus five centuries earlier that vipers were mother killers – that the children, the brood, killed their mothers in revenge for the fact that the females killed the males during procreation. 'Mother-killer' becomes, then, a way of saying that these leaders were utterly depraved morally³.

Therefore being 'children of Abraham' (verse 9) counted for nothing. Some of you have heard me say that my sister once worked out when doing some work on the family genealogy that she and I had grown up as the fifth generation of Methodist in the same congregation. But that would have meant nothing spiritually if we both had not taken the decision to respond to the grace of God and follow Jesus Christ ourselves.

And that's why I get disappointed when I go to a church and am greeted by someone who tells me with pride that they are a life-long Methodist. It counts for nothing unless the person has embraced Wesley's call to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, leading to a life of discipleship.

But John the Baptist exposes these religious leaders as people who rested on their spiritual heritage while using that as a cover for shamelessly immoral lives. I'd like to tell you that doesn't exist in the church today, but I'd be lying. From time to time I encounter it. I don't mean those who are genuinely struggling to conquer sin but not always succeeding, I mean those who are happy to use religious respectability as a cover for a totally different lifestyle. You know – the sort of stories that make salacious headlines occasionally, and bring the church into disrepute.

Now I sincerely hope this third and final point is the one that makes least connection with anybody here today. Perhaps it is more made to be preached at Synod or Conference!

But were any of us to be living a double life, outwardly proclaiming our faithfulness to the truth while using that to hide a shameful life, then Advent is

the time to hear Jesus' warning that he won't play games with us. He can make new faithful people out of stones, he says (verse 9). We shouldn't rely on some sense of being indispensable to him.

Conclusion

All these three sets of people we've considered point us to the fact that Advent is a season of preparation, but it is preparation that happens by repentance. Not for nothing have some Christian traditions called Advent 'The Lesser Lent.'

We prepare for Christ's coming by inviting the Holy Spirit to examine our hearts. He prepares the way of the Lord in us and makes straight paths for him in our lives (verse 3).

¹ Craig S Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, p118f.

² Ian Paul, <https://www.psephizo.com/biblical-studies/john-the-baptist-jesus-and-judgement-in-matthew-3/>

³ Keener, p122f.