What are some of the beliefs you hold most deeply? Young people are still forming them; adults often carry them unquestioned – particularly in the areas of money, work, family, and faith. Each one of us, whether we're conscious of it or not, has a built-in ***belief system*** that's often shaped by childhood experiences, and which influences our ***thoughts***, our ***emotions*** and our ***behaviour***. My own belief system, for example, tells me that if I work hard, then I'll be loved. It also tells me that if I go to Mass and say my prayers, then I'll get to heaven… But the challenge is that our belief systems are not always aligned with the Gospel. It's ***into*** this part of our lives that God speaks today through the voice of John the Baptist: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand."

Even though John the Baptist appears in the ***New*** Testament, he's known as the last of the Old Testament prophets, whose role to this day is to herald the ***Advent***, or ***coming***, of Christ. "On ***Him***," Isaiah says in our first reading, "the spirit of the Lord rests." "In ***His*** days," declares the Psalmist, "justice shall flourish… for ***He*** shall save the poor when they cry." "May ***His*** name be blessed for ever."

John the Baptist's proclamation to "Repent" may be challenging at face value – I don't think any of us like to be told to do anything, let alone to Repent. But the word's original Greek meaning, 'to ***change*** the mind,' or 'to ***turn*** our minds to Christ,' goes much deeper. It speaks of the effect in a person ***when*** their mind is renewed or transformed (Rom 12:2). How does that happen? Through the transformation of our deeply held beliefs by the Holy Spirit. In a faith context, this is what happens ***in*** a person when their faith grows from being built on ***belief*** and ***ascent to*** what the Church teaches, to faith built on ***belief & ascent plus*** the personal

experience of encountering Jesus Christ in the power of Holy Spirit. Repentance, therefore, is the human response to God's invitation to personal, ***heart-knowledge*** of Jesus, rather than a command that addresses guilt, regret or punishment.

How, then, might we recognise when our belief systems are being challenged or are changing? Well, what does John say to the Pharisees and Sadducees - apart from calling them a brood of vipers? *"If you are repentant, produce the appropriate fruit."* And what is that fruit…? The nine fruits of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. These give us a way to discern when the Holy Spirit is truly at work in us. But they're not things to simply ***recognise*** in our lives and tick the box: I love; I'm patient; I have self-control – they're markers of God's transformative presence in our lives against yesterday, last month and last year. 'Am I ***more*** patient ***now*** than that time I lost it with my neighbour, or am I being obstinate in this area like the Pharisees and Sadducees?' And so while the ***fruit of repentance*** is sometimes sudden as the result of a transformational encounter with Jesus, it often only becomes visible through the slow, daily process of examining our belief system against what God is asking of us.

In a chronological sense, John the Baptist's role was to prepare the way for Jesus – to make his paths straight. But it's also a role we're given when we're baptised. If I've said it once, I'll say it for the rest of my life, there's nothing individual about salvation because the baptised are commissioned to turn outward beyond these walls to accompany others into the loving embrace of Jesus….. rather than cling to belief systems that tell us that we have ***no*** responsibility for our neighbour's salvation.

So today, on this second Sunday of Advent, John the Baptist extends God's invitation —not as a finger-wagging prophet, but as a friend who wants our freedom. His cry to *repent* is not a threat but an invitation to step out from the limitations of old belief systems and into the new life Jesus offers. Through daily personal prayer, may we allow Holy Spirit to renew our minds, reshape our assumptions, and to bear fruit within us. And may that transformation ***never*** stay private. The more Christ is alive in us, the more naturally we become heralds of Advent-hope for others—parents, children, friends, colleagues, strangers, and even fellow parishioners! Amen.