

# Mark - Murder at a Royal Party

by J. Glyn Owen

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of repentance and the need to turn away from sin, using the story of Herod Antipas as a tragic example of the consequences of immorality.*

**Duration:** 43:21

**Scripture:** Matthew 3:2, Matthew 4:17, Mark 1:14-15, Mark 6:12, Luke 24:47, Acts 2:38, Acts 17:30

**Topics:** "Murder"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on the proclamation of the message by the twelve disciples whom Jesus had called and sent out. They preached that people should repent. The sermon then delves into the story of Herod and his indecision, which ultimately led to the murder of John the Baptist. The speaker emphasizes the importance of not just proclaiming the word, but also seeing the fruit of repentance in the lives of the hearers. The sermon connects this message to Jesus' own preaching about the kingdom of God being near.

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## Transcript

Now would you kindly turn with me again to St. Mark's Gospel in chapter 6. And we are going to take the passage that we read earlier in the service as the basis of our message and meditation this morning, namely verses 12 to 29. Now the whole passage leads up to a climax as you will have discovered already. A climax in which we see the decisive indecision of a man who heard the word of God.

His indecision led him into a compromise position that in turn eventuated in his murder of one of God's greatest servants, John the Baptist. So we've entitled our message this morning, Murder at a Royal Party. But in order to see this we've got to take a little glimpse of the context.

I'm not going to spend much time delineating the backdrop, the back cloth today, because we are coming to that main and eventual thrust of the passage. But it is necessary nevertheless to see the context. Now the first thing I would like you to notice then is the proclamation of the message declared in verse 12.

They went out and preached that men should repent. Now this refers of course to the 12 whom our Lord had called to him and then had sent them out two by two in order to preach his word and to perform such miracles of mercy as he himself had commanded them. They went out and preached that people should repent.

The proclamation of the message. I want to focus on that for just a moment because it's exceedingly important. I want you to see first of all a continuity of ministry here.

The message that was proclaimed by the 12 was nothing novel now. You will doubtless remember that this same message of repentance had already been the burden of the Baptist's entire ministry. However long that ministry persisted, it was the burden, the main burden of John.

He did other things, but this was the main thrust of his entire ministry. We read in Matthew chapter 3 verses 1 and 2 that in those days John the Baptist came preaching in the desert of Judea and saying, repent for the kingdom of heaven is near. And then in verse 8 of the same chapter in Matthew, produce fruit says John in keeping with repentance.

You notice he wasn't simply, he wasn't simply content with proclaiming the word. He wanted to see in his hearers a produce. He wanted to see the fruit that was as he puts it in keeping with repentance, consistent with repentance, exhibiting repentance.

He looked for it. He looked for men whose wills were bent and broken, whose hearts were saddened by the awareness of their own need and whose hearts were in due course becoming reattuned to the Holy one of Israel, the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ. But now you will remember that this was also the first theme that Jesus preached about.

In Mark chapter 1 verses 14 and 15, we read these words. After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee proclaiming the good news of God. The time has come.

He said, the time has come. The kingdom of God is near. So what? And this is the thrust.

Repent said Jesus of Nazareth and believe the good news. You see the continuity of the proclamation. We even have it of course back in the Old Testament.

But John takes it up in this context of immediately preceding context. Jesus again takes it on. When John is put in prison, Jesus moves out proclaiming the same message.

Now it is at this point that the 12 disciples go out two by two. And what is their message? Is it something novel? Is it something new? Not on your life. You may find many faults with these 12 at this stage, but you certainly will not find that they proclaim their own message.

They have been given the word. They had been told what to say and they go out as servants under authority and they likewise proclaim repent. The time is fulfilled.

The kingdom of the heavens is at hand. Repent therefore and believe the good news. You see the continuity.

As a matter of interest, though this is not related to our subject this morning particularly, as a matter of interest, let us remember that this was the main thrust of the early church following Pentecost. Jesus arranged it so. We read in Luke chapter 24, he opened their minds so that they could understand the scriptures.

The two on the road to Emeus, he told them, this is what is written. The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem. Now this is no accident.

The old testaments thundered it. John the Baptist preached it. Jesus took it up.

He sent out the 12 with the same message and then when he is risen from the dead, he tells the newborn church, he says, now this is your message. And isn't it wonderful to be able to report that they were obedient to the heavenly vision. On the day of Pentecost, I read in Acts chapter 2 and verse 38, when Peter got up to preach, he said among other things, Peter replied, repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

A continuity of ministry. Now the next thing briefly, the universality of its application. When Jesus sent his disciples out, it was to preach repentance to all men.

And so we read, they went out and preached that people should repent. That's a general term, a general statement. In other words, you see, they didn't go up to what was called in those days, the mongrel community of Samaritan of some, some area and told the Samaritans that they needed repentance and they alone.

No, no. Neither did they make for the outright Gentiles and address the message of repentance to them and them alone. No.

Believe it or not. They went to the very children of Abraham as well as to Samaritans and Gentiles in due course. In other words, wherever they went, they preached the message of repentance.

It's a universal message. Unless we have any, any, any qualms about this, any doubts about this. Let me remind you of Paul's words in Acts chapter 17 and verse 30.

In the past says God to those Athenian listeners in the past, God overlooked such ignorance as had been referred to in the context. But now he commands all men everywhere to repent. This has universal application.

Will you pardon me therefore, for being so bold this morning is saying to you, dear people here in Knox, and first of all to myself, but to you with me, you need to show repentance and I do. Are you a repentant sinner? Am I? And the other thread here woven in here is the sense of urgency given to the message. The time has now come, says Jesus.

John said the same and the disciples say the same. The time has arrived. There's no more time.

The kingdom of the heavens is at hand. Jesus, the king has come and the kingly power, the reign of God, the rule of God is present in principle in him, though it's consummation may be a long way off, but the king is here and the king demands that you put things right. Brothers and sisters in Christ would to God that we could grasp this this morning.

This is the message for the ongoing church into every age until the king arrives to consummate his kingdom. It's a message to unbelievers and it is a message to the church for repentance must needs be an ongoing thing as long as we are ongoingly sinful. That's the first thing then the proclamation of the message.

Now just a word about the confirmation of credentials. This is a special context in which we see credentials being confirmed. I can only refer to them.

First of all, we see our Lord's credentials being confirmed. When he went to the synagogue in Nazareth, he read from Isaiah chapter 61 and he said, the spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has anointed me to preach glad tidings to the poor.

He has anointed me to do certain things. I'm not going into the details now. We've been there a few Sundays ago, but the thing I want you to notice is this, that is being precisely fulfilled in this context.

What Jesus claimed is now being fulfilled. His credentials are being manifestly proved before the eyes of men. He is preaching the acceptable year of the Lord to the most wicked and perverse of men.

And he is bringing the powers of the world to come to bear upon all the issues and problems of daily life. His credentials are being confirmed. The second thing is this in verse seven of this chapter, Jesus gave authority to the 12 to cast out demons and Matthew adds to heal all kinds of diseases and infirmities.

As I was indicating last morning, this last Sunday morning, that's very important because we're told in Matthew also that Jesus healed all diseases and all infirmities. And he gives authority to his disciples to do the kind of thing that he did so that the continuity was evident. Now, my friends in this context, they did precisely that.

They received the authority and the power from their Lord and they went out and they preached and they preached with authority and they cast out demons. They did it with authority. They healed the sick.

They did it with authority. You see, things are being confirmed here in the action of Christian ministry. In fact, we may put it in a general sense.

The statement that the rule of the unseen God, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob, the Lord of creation, the kingship of God is being expressed here and now. So it's time to do something. God is on the scene.

Listen, my friend, if you and I realized this morning that God is here, we would realize it's time to do things. And we can only be cold and tepid and indifferent and indecisive because we don't really believe that God is here. If it is true that God has become incarnate, if it is true that God is speaking through his word again, if it is true that God is here by the spirit, then we must do something about it.

And primarily we must repent of our sins. We must turn away from our sins. Now that's the context.

And all that in this general passage before us this morning, all that leads up to a tragedy. It's a kind of backdrop. Or if you like, it's the gilt edge for the picture that is to be filled in.

And it's the picture of a tragedy. The tragedy takes the form of an illustration of sheer indecision. Indecision that led to the rejection of the proclamation of the apostles and of the Savior and of John and of the prophets and of God through his servants.

And led to the kind of rejection that in turn led even to the murder of one of God's significant servants, John the Baptist. Now that's the context. Let's come to the passage before us which concentrates now in its climactic area.

Let's come to this passage which concentrates upon the nightmarish confusion of John. As he heard John the Baptist preach the message of repentance, and sorry, as he heard now the twelve preach the message of repentance. Let me read verses 14 to 16 now.

King Herod heard about it. These twelve are going about two by two. King Herod heard about it.

For Jesus' name had become well known. Some were saying John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. And that is why miraculous powers are at work in him.

Others said he is Elijah. And still others claimed he is a prophet like one of the prophets of long ago. I'm reading from the New International Version.

But when Herod heard it, he said, John, the man I beheaded has been raised from the dead. Now, you see, Herod had been challenged by John. It's a remarkable story.

It's a wonderful story, even though it's pathetic and tragic, but it's a wonderful story. It's an illuminating story. It's a kind of a lighthouse story in the Bible, and it tells us beware and be careful.

You see, John the Baptist had charged Herod with a sin that he was committing. Behind the cryptic statement that we have in verse 18, there lies a long story. Verse 18 reads, For John had been saying to Herod, not once, this is in the imperfect tense, John had been in the habit of saying to Herod, he'd gone to Herod more than once.

John had been in the habit of saying to Herod, Herod, it is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife. Now that's the pinpoint. That's the focal point around which everything here revolves.

But now behind this, there is a story, a tragic story, a murky story, a dark story. And I'm not going to give you all the hideous, blackish, brackish details of it this morning. I'm not going to do it.

If you want to read the story of one of the most tragic families, I believe, that ever lived in this world, you read the story of the Herods. And this is only one of their number. I don't think it is possible to come across the story, a more tragic story of immorality running through a family so that almost every family becomes a law unto himself and murders his brother or his sister or anybody else, because he is so totally overwhelmed by lust.

And it's one of that family that we have here. Herod Antipas, to give him his proper name. He was a wild, reckless man, son of an equally profligate father called Herod the Great.

Now this Herod of our text in recent times had gone to Rome to see his brother Philip, who was living there. Philip was married to a woman whose name was Herodias. She comes into this text.

How does she come here then? If she was Philip's wife living in Rome, how does she appear here? Well, she appears here because of this. Philip's very brother, this Herod, went to Rome and seduced his sister-in-law. And he managed to get her away from his own brother.

And at the same time, remember, she was his own niece. That's only half the story. He gets her away and he steals her and they live together in sin for a long, long time.

And John the Baptist, the only man in the kingdom who dare do such a thing, went up to King Herod and said, Herod the King, your majesty, this is wrong. Now there is a book that some of you may be familiar with called Quo Vadis. It's an old one.

It's a novel based on the Christian story. And there are some things in it which are very good. There are other things in it which may not be quite true.

But there is something in it to which I want to refer this morning. It describes the story of a Roman who fell in love with a Christian girl. He told this girl of his immense love for her and he wanted to marry her.

And she said, I'm sorry, I cannot marry you because you are not a believer in my Lord and my Savior Jesus Christ. I cannot do that. And she persuaded him quite categorically that this was impossible.

He decided to follow her and to pursue her and to see what she was doing. What kind of life was she living? Where was she going to? Who were her friends? And on this occasion, part of the story is this. He determines to follow this girl and she goes to meet with some Christians and Peter was there.

Now this is not necessarily true, but it's based on the Christian story. And he apparently overheard Peter preaching. And overhearing Peter preaching, he sensed, my, this is something big.

The kingdom of the Lord represented by Peter is greater even than the kingdom of the Caesars. And the standard proclaimed here is something which is superb and supreme. I'd really like to follow this teaching and I'd really like to know more about it.

And then he goes on listening as Peter is preaching. And he's trying to sum it all up and apply it to himself in order to discover whether he can become a Christian in order to marry this girl. The author says that he felt, and now I quote, and this is the point I was getting at, the author felt as if he would, the author says that he felt, this, this suitor, he felt as if he would have to, to have to place on a burning pile, all his thoughts, all his habits and his character, his whole nature up to that moment, burn them into ashes and then fill himself with a life altogether different and have an entirely different soul.

Can I repeat that? This man's allegedly listening to Peter, you see? And he's trying to sum up the message of the Christian life and he's applying it to himself and he says, says the writer, he felt as if he would have to place on a burning pile, on a fire, all his thoughts, all his habits have to be burnt and all his character right up to that moment. Everything has to be burnt into ashes. And then somehow or other, when the old has been burnt into ashes, he's got to, he's got to fill himself with a new life altogether and have a new soul.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, that's exactly what repentance is. And I don't know how deeply it got across to this man, Herod, but when he heard John preached about the need, the necessity for repentance, he felt something like this, something must happen to me. Herod's reaction to John's challenge is put in verse 20.

He wasn't prepared to go all the way, he wasn't prepared to decide, but he was prepared to do something. Now, the translations do not concur here at one or two points, but notice some things are very clear. Herod feared John.

This is remarkable, isn't it? The only weapon at John's disposal was the word of God and the spirit of God. He didn't have a, he didn't have a javelin, he didn't have a bow and arrow, he didn't have any human weapon at all. The only thing at John's disposal was the word of God and the spirit of God.

And here's the king in his callous, the greatest citadel of all in the old, in the New Testament era, and John felt insecure and unsafe because of this man with a word of God, penetrating and piercing and plowing into his soul and turning him inside out. Now many things, oh, I must finish the sentence. Herod feared John and you notice what he did, he protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man and in danger.

When Herod heard John, one translation puts it, he was greatly puzzled. Another translation puts it, the King James, he did many things. Now it's difficult to choose between them, which is right, which is wrong.

He was puzzled. There were many things that puzzled him, but some things were all too clear for his comfort. And what was too clear was this, that John was a man of God.

He was holy. He was just, he was righteous, and he was the mouthpiece of the God of whom the Israelites spoke. And Herod knew that.

Now, because Herod feared John in this sense and respected him, and he went to hear him gladly. Now, this is a thing in itself, that Herod, Herod of all people went to hear the Puritan John the Baptist preaching, not in a church like this, but in the wilderness of Judea. I tell you, that's a miracle, but it means you see that the word of John has penetrated a little.

It's got, it's got under his skin and he knows there's something wrong with him and he knows that John's got the way out of it. John can tell him the way of repentance and the way of faith and the way of forgiveness. And he goes to the desert to hear him preach.

And now Herod became embroiled in a raging conflict because of John and his message. First of all, there was the, the, the, the, the conflict within himself. His conscience had begun to work.

I hope we all know something about this. Men and women, do you know what it is to have a, a waging war with your conscience? I hope you do. I hope there is no one here this morning who is that in, in that morally insensitive condition that you've never had a battle with your conscience.

The prophet Jeremiah has a devastating word when he says about some people of his day that they've, they've, they've lost the art of blushing. They never feel uncomfortable and they can sin with impunity, you see, and it doesn't worry them. Oh, I trust you know what it is to have a raging war with your conscience.

You see, it means that you're still in touch with spiritual realities. God is after you. This is why Felix trembled before Paul.

And this is why Agrippa turned to Paul at last and said, almost Paul, you're persuading me to be a Christian. There was a conscience there. God had not left himself without witness.

Pagan Romans, though they were, God is not alone and he's not left himself without witness. And the word of God brings that conscience to light and it begins to stab. And even these folk felt it.

And when John the Baptist said to Herod, it is not lawful for you. Herod, you cannot take the law into your own hands and live with this woman who belongs to your brother. You've got no right.

It is not lawful. It is wrong. God says wrong.

Whatever you say. And Herod sensed the propriety of it. He made him uncomfortable.

But not only that, not only was there a conflict that emerged within him, there was a conflict, a very special conflict with the very woman that he's living with. Now this is really a story in psychology as well as in other respects. You see, apart from one significant fact, Herod and Herodias, the woman living with him now, Herod and Herodias are birds of a feather.

They are both morally on the same plane. They're living on the same kind of plane. The total lack of moral principle is what characterizes their lives.

But I say to you, there is one major distinction and difference. What is it you say? I'll tell you. Herod's conscience has been aroused.

Herodias is non-existent. It's as quiet as a cemetery in her soul. She brings up her own daughter to dance the prostitute's dance, as we shall see in a moment.

She will do anything. She will say anything. She will go anywhere.

She has no inhibitions at all. She just wants peace, to exercise license in the palace of Macarius as she had in Rome. She cares for no man, be he holy, be he unjust.

She cares for no one. She hasn't a conscience. She has sent her conscience into silence.

But John, you see, on the other hand, has got a conscience and he does, therefore, some of the strangest things that men do when they have a conscience. Because you see, it's not easy to get on with this woman. He wants her.

He lusts for her. Let's put it straight for what it is. He wants her in bed with him.

And that's why she's there. And yet he can't enjoy himself with her because of the voice of John the Baptist. And then he senses that John is a holy man.

He's afraid to get rid of John. But then this woman says, you must get rid of John. And so there is no pleasure in anything.

Everything loses its real pleasure because of John thundering from over there and then a quarrel with Herodias so that they can't get on together as he wants to get on with her. And you know, here the man begins to move into compromise. We read in verse 17 this remarkable statement.

Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested. And he had him bound and put in prison. Why? It says he did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife.

You see, on the one hand, he wants Herodias. He must have Herodias. He's stolen her away from his brother.

He's got her there in the palace. And you see, he must have her. On the other hand, he's afraid that she's going to murder John the Baptist.

And John the Baptist is a man of God, and he knows that. And so he puts John in prison ostensibly to safeguard John, but more properly to have peace to sin. Who can enjoy immorality with a prophet in the dungeon or outside the window somewhere shouting to the king, it is not lawful for you.

Now we're coming to the end. You see, sooner or later, a man who compromises gets caught in his own net. It's the abiding story.

It's the unending story. It's the story of history. You get it in all kinds of literature, Christian and non-Christian.

The man who lives by compromise will sooner or later get caught in his own net. Herod did. And with all his respect for John the Baptist and all his recognition that he was a good man and holy and a just and all the rest of it, is sooner or later, that very man is going to murder John in order to satisfy his lust and feed his pride.

How did it happen? Well, there was no need for Herod just to wait very long. The first thing here is a birthday party. Herod's birthday came around.

And you see, when the king gets his birthday, well, we have to have a birthday party, a birthday banquet, and all the high ups are there. You read the story. I don't need to go into the detail.

She did not have to wait. There comes this occasion of the party. And then the next thing on the agenda is that we have a dancing damsel.

To use the words of the King James, a dancing damsel. When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests. The king said to the girl, ask me for anything you want and I'll give it to you.

Now, this item was no unplanned event. Neither is it an insignificant event. It was, in fact, the star performance on Herodias' well-planned program for that night.

When, as was the inevitable, albeit unmentioned rule, when the guests were well fed and well wined and all were in a suitable mood, just at the appropriate time. Can you imagine the pagan revelry? Just at the appropriate time, Herodias brings in her little girl, her young girl, Salome. And Salome slithered onto the scene and began to dance.

Now we've got to get the background to this. Let me quote to you from one of the better known modern New Testament scholars. And I think I can put it in his words more briefly than I can in my own.

Solo dances, says he in those days, in such society were disgusting and licentious pantomimes. That a princess of the royal blood should so expose and demean herself is beyond belief. Because those dances were the art of professional prostitutes.

The very fact that she did so dance is a grim commentary, first upon the character of Salome and then under the mother who allowed and encouraged her to do so, as well as upon everyone else concerned. Most mothers would have shunned from the sully of daughter's childhood by allowing her to be the striptease dancer to a company of half-tipsy revelers. But not so Herodias.

She has no qualms. She has no conscience. She, you see, she was out.

She knew what she wanted. She has no conscience. She's got to get rid of a man that makes it uncomfortable for her to sin with Herod.

And she's going to get it. And the whole hosts of hell are at her aid, at her beck and call. It seems as if all the satanic powers of hell are available to help this woman to get what she wants.

And she does. Intoxicated by aroused lust as much as by wine. That was the meaning of this dance.

It was to arouse your lusts, ready for the girls that were waiting on the surrounding courts. Intoxicated by aroused lust as much as by wine, the dismal monarch rises to show his moral fiber in terms of his

response. Do you know what he said? My dear, he said, ask of me anything.

This has been so thrilling, this dance of yours. Oh, it's been so wonderful. Ask me anything.

Right up to the half of my kingdom, I'll give it to you. You see the man's tipsy. Man's not acting now wisely on the plane of sanity.

He's dulled. He's gone. He's caught.

He's in a mesh. His passions are aroused. His mind is blurred.

His intellect is gone somewhere. Anything, he says to this dancing girl, anything to the half of my kingdom. Poor girl was nonplussed.

She might have expected a bracelet of gold or something like that, but she was nonplussed. Why this lavishness all at once? Herod was never known for being such a kind-hearted character. Why all this? Ah, but you see, you see, I don't need to explain it.

So the girl naturally turns to her mother and she says, mother, mother, mother, you know, he's offering me anything to the half of his kingdom. What shall I ask him? Half of the kingdom? Half of the kingdom? He says the kingdom's mine already. He's in my hand.

I can do as I please with him. I can manipulate him. I'm his mistress.

I'm in charge here. I've got the palace already. Just you ask for the head of John the Baptist.

No, she says, go further. Ask for the head of John the Baptist on a charger and bring it into the feast as a kind of symbolic last dish to feast the souls of the murderers. And she did.

And the little girl goes and asks King Herod, Herod, this is what I want, not a bundle of gold, not a place in your kingdom, the head of John the Baptist. Herod was terribly sorry, but you see, along with passion now there came this aroused sense of pride. I've made my promise.

And I made my promise in the presence of the high ups of my kingdom. And when I've made a promise, I can't go back. You know, politicians so often get into this trouble.

They make a promise and it's difficult to retreat without losing face. And Herod was in exactly that position. If I go back, well, what? I dare not do it.

And whilst his sanity was involved as well as much else here, his sanity and his passion, he says, no, no, no. And he ordered somebody straight away, get the head of John the Baptist, bring it in. And the head waiter handed it over to the little girl and the little girl symbolically gave it to her mother.

Now, my friends, where's all this coming to? I thank you for your gracious listening. It tells you where it's coming to. Don't play with an aroused conscience.

When God, through his prophet Old Testament on you. And especially when God more than once through different people sounds the word of repentance in your ear and you feel uncomfortable about something for your soul's sake, put it right. That's what he's saying.

Don't tamper with your conscience, but obey it when the spirit of God is using it for your salvation. It may be hard. It may be difficult.

It may mean a lonely path, but it's the only safe path. Because you see, as sure as this man who had the greatest respect for John the Baptist, as sure as he was put in a compromising position that eventually led him to murder the very man he honored. So certain it is that if you don't obey the word of God, you will be put in some such situation too.

I feel this this morning. I tell you quite honestly and openly, I feel the startling significance of this. For myself, as a pastor of a church, and the head of a home, and for you, dear people, whether you're worshipers here or whether you're visitors.

When God has often repeated his word to arouse your conscience, obey it. The only alternative is to make a fool of yourself. And as John Bunyan said, there's a road that goes all the way to hell from outside the very entrance into heaven.

Let us pray. Our Heavenly Father, we bow humbly in your presence, acknowledging that your word is light and truth. And it is indeed a two-edged sword that pierces right through to the very soul, the very heart of our being, and finds us out.

And we ask of you today that it may please you to save us from the kind of disaster that this man Herod entered into. Our circumstances, of course, are so different, our Lord, we need not rehearse before you the differences. But we know too of those who have followed his way in our world, in our day, in our age, in our very society.

And we know how easy it would be for us to do so. Oh, save us. Oh, save us.

Lord, save us. And in order so to do, give us grace to heed the word and the spirit as they come through your authenticated servants, be it John or Jesus or the apostles or their successors. Bring forth in us the fruit that is meat for repentance and to life eternal through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen.

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