

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 12th December 2021
The Third Sunday of Advent

Collect

God for whom we watch and wait,
you sent John the Baptist to prepare the way of your Son:
give us courage to speak the truth,
to hunger for justice,
and to suffer for the cause of right,
with Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Philippians 4:4-7

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Luke 3:7-18

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.'

And the crowds asked him, 'What then should we do?' In reply he said to them, 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.' Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.' Soldiers also asked him, 'And we, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.'

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Sermon

Do you ever find yourself thinking, “I wish I was more like John the Baptist?” I’m not talking about the camel hair clothing, leather belt and diet of locusts and wild honey – though each to his own. It’s just that every time I find myself wondering how he had the sheer brass neck to say the things that he did, I realise that his directness didn’t stop people from wanting to hear his opinion. In fact maybe that authenticity was part of his appeal.

I have never found myself inclined to stand in the pulpit and refer to you as a brood of vipers – or today’s equivalent. Now of course you’ll be the first to tell me that you are all far too lovely to be accused in that way. Yet I do admire the fact that John the Baptist did not hold back. That he believed his message was so important that it needed to be heard. That he didn’t fear the short-term consequences – the equivalent of people walking out of the church – because he really believed that there was so much more at stake. And the result was that people sought him out to ask his opinion; to gain clarification on what they should be doing.

There are a number of things that mark out John the Baptist, and as we explore each one, we may discover just a little more about ourselves and our own purposes as we continue our Advent preparations.

In a lot of what he says, John is direct. He has a message to get across, and he isn’t prepared to go around the houses. There are reasons for this directness. His purpose was to prepare the way for Jesus, the Messiah. And Jesus was on his way. He needed to know that people were getting on with their preparations. That they were listening and taking action. Only then would they be able to recognise Jesus as Messiah.

The times of John the Baptist were very different from our own. He probably hadn’t learnt about marketing strategies, or studied human psychology before opening his mouth. Our approach in today’s world would undoubtedly be different, so we have to dig a little deeper to make sense of why he attracted followers.

When John suggests that it is not enough to claim Abraham as an ancestor, he is reminding people that they can’t rest on their laurels. That what they do and how they behave matters. Whenever someone is baptised, we acknowledge that it is the beginning of a lifelong journey. What John the Baptist is saying is the equivalent of reminding people that it isn’t enough to get baptised, confirmed and go to church on Sunday. If our behaviour towards others doesn’t reflect the values that we speak about on a Sunday morning, we haven’t understood properly.

To be clear, though, there is greater subtlety than John the Baptist expresses. During Lent earlier this year, when a number of us explored the parables, one of the things that came up when we discussed the parables of good and bad fruit was our very real understanding that people are rarely all good or all bad. Rather, we all have both good and bad within us. And that’s what makes the preparation that John the Baptist speaks of particularly challenging. Part of our ongoing preparation as followers of Christ is to be attentive to both the good and bad in our own lives, and make changes where necessary.

John the Baptist’s directness, though, does seem to bear its own fruit. Instead of being put off by his observation that the tree bearing bad fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire, people are

apparently inspired to discover more. They begin to ask John very specific questions about what it is that they must do in order to bear good fruit. And it is here that we learn more about John. And in so doing can appreciate the depth of his integrity.

We hear of three very specific approaches to John, and the way he responds to each. The first is people in the crowd – which could be any one of us – who ask what they should do. His response is clear. If you have two coats, give one away. If you have more food than you need, share it. This may sound simple, but it is actually extraordinarily profound. John the Baptist knows what countless organisations have sought to remind us down the ages. That the earth produces enough for everyone to be fed. That no-one needs to go hungry; that all can be clothed. If every individual heeded John the Baptist's advice, poverty and hunger would come to an end. It's a sobering thought. I wonder whether you, like me, sometimes feel powerless in the face of an international social and political situation that is way beyond our individual control? Yet what John the Baptist reminds us is that we can still do our bit. More than that, we *must* do our bit. And we do so in the knowledge that if everyone else did, too, we really would begin to see God's kingdom.

John's responses to the tax collectors and soldiers are equally enlightening. He doesn't suggest that people shouldn't fulfil these roles. There is no sense in which there isn't a place for tax collectors and soldiers in the world. Indeed that these can't be vocational. What makes them vocational is the *way* in which they are fulfilled. With honesty and integrity; not seeking to extort or take advantage of a position of power and responsibility. Again, there is a simplicity here. If everyone's motivations were pure, we really would see signs of God's kingdom here on earth. And probably we have all had those occasions of seeing glimpses. And John the Baptist's point is that we should play our part. He doesn't point to the failings of others – or, indeed, our lack of control over the actions of others. Rather, his focus is on us, and what we can do. He reminds us that it matters.

And it is at this point that we get a glimpse of why it is that people listen to John the Baptist. Because he embodies all that he preaches. There are those who are so inspired by him that they wonder whether he is the promised Messiah. Can you imagine just how tempting it could be to make such a claim? To be sucked in by people's recognition, even adulation. Yet John the Baptist remains true to his purpose. It is his calling to prepare the way. There is a Messiah – and he is coming. But that is not John. Just as his advice to others is not to exceed the boundaries of their own authority; to act with honour and integrity in their various roles; so that is what he lives out himself. He has come to prepare the way, and that is what he does. Once the Messiah arrives, his role will have been fulfilled.

So what about us? What are we called to? And how can we fulfil our own calling with honour and integrity; remain within the boundaries of our own responsibilities; and point the way to the Messiah? Perhaps these are some of the questions for us this Advent.

Amen