

Sermon – Sunday 16th December 2018 – 9.30 am

I think it's fair to say that John the Baptist adopts a unique approach to preaching. I'm trying to imagine the equivalent here at St. Mary's – one of our baptism services, with the church reasonably full with friends and family of the candidates, and my sermon begins with "You brood of vipers!" – or perhaps, "you miserable sinners", or "you bunch of ne'er do wells."

And it doesn't end there. Not only does John address the crowd in front of him as "you brood of vipers", but he goes on to stick the knife in, explaining the problem further. Just because they are successors of Abraham, does not mean that they are safe – indeed, it doesn't mean that they are saved. So once again, it would be like saying to our gathered baptism families, "Don't think it's enough to get your lovely baby baptised, because it isn't!"

You'll have noticed that I don't tend to adopt the John the Baptist school of preaching in our services. Indeed I rather think it could lead to a reduction in the number of parents bringing their children for baptism here at St. Mary's. In fact I doubt that many of you would want to stay around for very long.

But here's the interesting thing. However shocking it may seem to us – and however likely it might be today that such an approach would empty the church – John the Baptist's crowd sticks around. Not only that, but they want to know more. They press him to explain what he means and ask him for individual advice for their own situations. They enter into such a dynamic conversation that I can almost imagine being there, jostling to be noticed, wanting to ask about my own situation.

I wonder if you can picture it, too? John has advised the tax collector not to collect more than the amount prescribed; the soldier not to extort money with menaces; all of us to share our clothes and food if we have more than enough and there are people in need. What about your situation? Would you like advice as a mother; a son; a grandparent; a teacher; an accountant? And what, I wonder, would John the Baptist have to say to you? What would it look like for you to be bearing good fruit in your own situation and circumstances?

In the Advent book some of us are following, Tom Wright takes a very particular approach to this morning's gospel reading. He places great significance on the way John the Baptist encourages people to get on with things. To do something. And he goes further, suggesting that he deliberately does not encourage wide-ranging debate. That may come later, but the way in which he is called to prepare the way is a call to action, to encouraging people to do things differently.

I wonder if that's the whole story, though? Of course it's important to do things, but personally I find it almost impossible *not* to think about the reasons why. It seems to be built into me, that constant quest for the purpose, the explanation behind the call to action. And maybe that's how it feels to you too. Yet reflecting on Tom Wright's words a couple of things have occurred to me.

The first is a reminder of those times that I have discovered far more about the purpose by *doing* something than I could ever have come to know by *thinking* about it. I have been trained for a number of things in life – teaching, leading church services, mentoring young people, to name a few – but there is no book learning in the world, even including practical activities, that can replicate the real experience – and what I have discovered through engaging in the experience.

In 2012, I made a very spur-of-the-moment decision to spend over a fortnight in South Africa, shadowing a priest. Unusually for me I hadn't thought out what it was that I might expect, what I was hoping to learn. A couple of people I trusted nudged me towards the decision, and off I went. Needless to say, in the process of being in South Africa, experiencing new things, meeting people and seeing things I had never seen before I learned things I could not have predicted in advance, however much preparation I had done, or however many books I had read.

The second thing Tom Wright helped me to remember is the differences in our vocations in life – the different ways in which God calls each one of us. Part of the reason I tend to ask “why” a lot is because it's my calling. As a Vicar it is part of my role to help us all to find out where God is at work in the world and join in. Sometimes to ask difficult questions about our motivations in order to check out that we really are following God. But each of our callings is different. The soldier who seeks John the Baptist's advice is no less seeking to follow Christ than John the Baptist himself. But part of his calling is to be a soldier. And it is John who helps him to see that to be a faithful soldier, he must not extort money by threats or false accusation. And so maybe that's how it can be for us too – that sometimes we need someone to ask the “why” questions for us, when we are immersed in the challenges of living our daily lives.

Tom Wright says that while Jesus would give more detailed teaching than John, he never retreated from the things John was saying here. In this season of preparation – of making ourselves ready to celebrate the presence of God in our lives in the form of a baby born in Bethlehem all those years ago – there is so much we can learn from John the Baptist. He knew who he was – and who he was not. He never shied away from being the one who was to prepare the way for the Messiah. And as he embodied that role, he reminded his followers that they, too, needed to find their own way of living out God's call in their lives.

Advent is a time to reflect on what it means to be faithful in our own lives. To challenge ourselves to consider the advice John the Baptist might give to us about what it looks like for us to bear good fruit.

Today's reading concludes with the words: “So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.” And what he has to tell us really is good news. Because John encourages us to examine ourselves and gently separate the wheat from the chaff in the things that we do so that we really are ready to welcome Jesus into our lives once more.

Amen