

Advent 3 Luke 3: 7-18 John the Baptist's call to repentance 15th Dec 2024

Lord Jesus, may we hear, listen and respond to your word today. Amen.

You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee the coming wrath? We do not know when the Lord will return and come to judge the living and dead. Are you ready? Do you think that being a good Anglican and coming to Church and going through the motions will save you? Repent and believe the good news and live a life worthy of your calling. I say it again, repent, pick up your cross and follow Christ. Then you will know salvation on the day of his return.

Do you think I would make a good fire and brimstone preacher like the Prophet John the Baptist? Would you still listen and follow me if I were to preach regularly with a hard message of warning and judgment, while still proclaiming the *good news*? Would you respond like the crowds following John who asked *what should we do*?

John's style of preaching certainly did not seem to turn the crowds away, rather they seemed hungry for his words. There had not been a prophet like him for over 400 years, not since the likes of Malachi. The Jews were looking for a Saviour...was John the one? His words may have been uncomfortable for some to hear but he spoke with Holy Spirit conviction and truth. The Lord was drawing his people to himself, and John was the chosen one to prepare the way for the coming King – Lord Jesus.

As we heard last week John was an interesting character dressed in camels hair, eating locusts and wild honey. We would probably think he was a bit of a nutter today, but the Holy Spirit had been upon him from his conception in his mother Elizabeth's womb. He was God's chosen vessel to proclaim the coming Kingdom.

Something was afoot in Israel. Reminds me of the Narnia Chronicles...In the Lion, the witch and wardrobe the beavers and other creatures knew that Aslan (the Lion – like Jesus) was on the move when the prophecy was fulfilled when 2 sons and 2 daughters of Eve arrived in Narnia...the ice and snow began to melt. Aslan the King was coming to bring in a new era...to defeat the evil one.

John was the one that Isaiah had prophesied concerning preparing the way for the Lord who would bring the kingdom of God and defeat sin and death.

The crowds somehow knew that something was afoot, something was happening, their hearts were stirred. They could hear the truth in John's words.

They followed him – even out into the desert. They were perhaps tired of the hypocrisy they saw in other Jewish Religious Leaders; they were looking for something more.

So, they did not laugh at John and his dress and way of living, they did not run back home because his words were too harsh as he called them a... *brood of vipers!* They didn't argue with him, when John stated that being ancestors of Abraham was not enough to save them...

What did they do? They asked him a question...*what then should we do?*

They had come to be baptized, to be cleansed, to be forgiven. John had proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He now tells them that repentance involves a changed life, it involves living a life that shows you have repented. Bearing fruits of repentance.

John's reply to their question is simple, nothing that couldn't be achieved, but instructions in line with the character of God and the message that Jesus would continue to bring as he began his ministry. *Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.*

He didn't say go to the synagogue or temple and take a sacrifice, or fast every week; no, it was care for the poor, share what you have, look out for the needy. Show compassion just as your Father in Heaven is compassionate. Or as Jesus would later say; *Love your neighbour as yourself, love one another as I have loved you.*

Among the crowds were tax collectors, those despised ones. But they too had sought John out in the wilderness, they too had come to be baptized. They too ask of John *Teacher, what must we do?* And John doesn't tell them that they should leave their jobs, jobs that were known for their high potential of abuse – extracting more money for tolls and taxes than they should. John simply says to them; *collect no more than that which is appointed to you.* Be a difference in the workplace. Be fair, be ethical. Stand out as someone who does not corrupt the system. Jesus also went on to be friends with the tax collectors and we know the amazing story of Zacchaeus who encountered Jesus and turned *his* life around, as he chose to follow Jesus he said; *Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."* **9** and Jesus said to him, *"Today salvation has come to this house"*. His repentance resulted in bearing fruit, his actions showed a changed life.

There were soldiers following John in the desert also. Soldiers possibly in Herod's service – perhaps assigned to protect the tax collectors and to enforce collections. These soldiers would also have been despised by the people as they used force to coerce excessive payments for personal gain. They too ask John...*And we, what should we do?*

Again, John doesn't tell them to leave their occupation, but rather he says to them; *Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation and be satisfied with your wages.*

John hasn't condemned the tax collectors and soldiers rather he tells them how they should live as repentant followers of the one true God.

Unless we are specifically called to a particular ministry – Jesus doesn't ask us to leave our occupations either, but rather to be his ambassadors wherever we find ourselves, bearing fruit for his glory. Showing love, joy, peace, kindness, compassion, justice, fairness, and self-control. We are to bear the fruits of the spirit – befitting repentant lives.

These crowds, the tax collectors and soldiers felt the spirit stirring in their hearts...felt convicted by John's words. They were ready to live new lives as a result. So naturally they began to wonder -was he the one they were expecting. Was John the Messiah?

It would have been easy for John to be tempted to get a big head, he had the numbers following him, he could have led a revolution in his own name. Taken the leadership challenge thrown to him by the crowds. But no, he knew his place. He was not the Messiah. He was quick to quell such speculation.

He answers the question in their hearts with this; *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 sandal. He will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.*

John was a powerful leader, but he did not abuse his power. He pointed to the one who was to come. He remained in his chosen position – his Godly calling of preparing the way for the Messiah.

John saw himself as a servant of the Lord, unworthy to untie his sandals. Jesus, who is the Messiah, the King of the universe...went on to model this servant leadership, stooping to wash his disciples' feet and telling them to go and do likewise.

John knew that his baptism was far inferior to the one that Jesus would bring – a baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire. The Holy Spirit is what Jesus promised to send his followers after his death and resurrection, and we can wonder if John's reference to fire is the imagery of the tongues of fire that were evidenced on the day of Pentecost. Or was he was speaking of a refining fire or of a fire of wrath and judgment.

All could be applicable; in Acts we read that tongues of fire accompany the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost; in the Old Testament Zechariah, Isaiah, Malachi and others speak of being purified and refined in fire and 1 Peter speaks of our afflictions and our faith being tested in the fire, being refined to the glory and praise of God.

But for those who do not repent and believe, fire represents the wrath and judgement of God. John says that the one who is coming will have his *winnnowing fork 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.*

And with many other exhortations John proclaimed the good news! You may think John's message was more about judgement than good news, an interesting passage to be paired with this advent week and other readings on JOY!. But just as John proclaimed, the Messiah did come to bring his Kingdom – Jesus later reports to John that the blind see, the lame walk, the dead are raised. And he brought salvation as he defeated sin and the devil through his death and resurrection. He did pour out his Holy Spirit and continues to do so upon those who repent and are baptized in his name. That is good news of great joy.

But we also know that one day Jesus will return and as we say each week in the creed, he is coming to judge the living and the dead.

So, do we heed John's call today, that was echoed even more so by Jesus who calls us to repentance and new life in him? Life in which we rejoice in the Lord always as Paul told the Philippians in our other reading today. As we repent, we will know peace and joy.

And when we repent, we should ask Jesus, like the crowds, the tax collectors and the soldiers asked John, *what then should we do?*

John's instructions can be summed up as him telling them to share, be fair and don't be a bully. Take a moment to think about how you can bear fruit of repentance. Go visit a lonely neighbour, give more to the poor, stand up for truth and justice, be friendly to the outcast. Love one another as Jesus loves you.

Will you invite Jesus, the Messiah, to be the Ruler in your life bearing fruit for his glory, allowing him to refine you with fire rather than being thrown in to the fire on his return.

May the spirit of Christ be stirring in your heart this advent so that you hear and receive the good news, live it and proclaim it.

You brood of vipers...Rejoice in the Lord always...and again I say rejoice! Repent, receive forgiveness, grace and mercy, peace and joy and believe in the gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!! Amen.