

Homily for Choral Matins at Holy Trinity Geneva on Sunday 15 December 2024  
The Third Sunday of Advent

*Texts: Zephaniah 3.14-end; Luke 3.7-18*

### **Don't forget the repentance**

In the midst of the seasonal cheer of Advent, which is growing daily in intensity, John the Baptist's words come to us rather like an unpleasant bucket of cold water hurled over us. 'Don't rely on your religious credentials; repent'; bear good fruit'.

Yet we shouldn't be surprised. Advent is a penitential season, though one framed with joyful expectation. And repentance and the call to us to wake up, repent and change our lives is an integral part of our getting ready for the coming of Christ. John the Baptist's gospel of repentance is an essential first step before we are ready to accept Jesus' gospel of love at Christmas.

John the Baptist was preaching to the crowds in the wilderness, in the context of the general corruption which characterised the local Roman political rule of King Herod Antipas and his brother Philip. But John knew that many in the crowds who flocked to listen to him, were implicated and tainted by this corruption through working for the regime in their daily lives - all were in need of repentance and healing.

John stressed to the crowds that it was *urgent*. The Messiah was coming – they had to be ready. Just as we wouldn't receive an important visitor into our home if we were filthy and unprepared for their coming, nor can they receive the Messiah if they are not prepared. The theologian Tom Wright compares John's words to an urgent flood warning – 'Get out now'; get to safety; get prepared!

And they are words which would have made sense to his listeners, because they knew the scriptures. The idea of repentance and being made spiritually clean so that we may encounter God is a key motif in the Hebrew scriptures. The prophet Ezekiel writes:

*'I will sprinkle clean water upon you and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses and from your idols I will cleanse you' (Ezekiel 36.25)*

*And in Psalm 51, the psalmist writes:*

*'Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin' (Psalm 51.2)*

This is rooted in the Exodus, the purging waters through which God brought his people to freedom. Now John now is inviting the crowd to enter a new Exodus, through the water of baptism. And we here this morning, are being called on this third Sunday in Advent, to the conversion of our lives in preparation for Christ.

The image of running water is helpful here because it reminds us that life is not static. Life is a constant process of development and change and we need to be

open to be transformed. We need to be open to the constant call to reflect about our lives; to repent; be willing to change; and to bear fruit- the sort of fruit which will bring lasting good.

It's a challenging call for us to hold onto in Advent, because this is the time we do so many traditional things. We hold Advent and Christmas carol services, write Christmas cards, set up the crib in church, have nativity plays. These are important too. But we have to hold the two together because Christ is coming into the here and now – the reality of the present situation of our lives and world in December 2024 and we need to be ready to receive Him.

Like the religious leaders whom John spoke to in the crowd, we need to avoid resting on our laurels. Hopefully John would not address us as “You generation of vipers” if he were here this morning – although if we are too steeped in complacency perhaps he might! But on a more serious note, his words are a sharp wake-up call to us not rest on our position as a long-established Anglican church in the heart of Geneva – that we have all the answers and we are getting everything right. John challenges us to look hard think and pray both as individuals and as a church family together, whether we are living the life of Christ. Would the Christ-child, his refugee parents and the entourage of odd visitors they attract, really be welcome here and in our homes?

The crowd are open to John's words as he speaks to them – his message is getting home. But they are also anxious – how do they make this radical conversion and get ready?

John is both very clear and practical and his answers. To the crowds he says – share if you can. Share your coats if you have more than one; share your food if you can. To the tax collectors, who asked him what they should do, and these would have been Jewish tax collectors like Matthew working for the Roman regime, John is forthright – ‘Collect no more that the amount they are legally due’. And to the soldiers, who again were likely to be Jewish soldiers serving King Herod, John tells them not to abuse their power by exhorting money and to be content with what they have.

And this is a pretty direct message to us too. First of all – share! It may be on a very practical level we can share – many of us have more clothes and possessions than we need and we may also be able to provide financial support to those in need. Advent is a good time to ask ourselves – is there someone who needs this more than I do? And if so, what am I going to do about it?

But the invitation to share is also a call in Advent to remember both our interconnectedness and our vulnerability. In Advent we look forward with joy and amazement to the coming of God into our world as a human baby. God becoming incarnate means God experiencing our world in every way as we do – through our embodied selves and sharing in our vulnerability. Sharing means opening ourselves to the reality that we are all connected and rely on each other. Many films and novels value the solitary hero who ‘does it alone against the odds’. Yet the reality is that we

are created to exist in relationships, to rely on and help each other and this is the very foundation of Christian compassion and kindness.

Don't take more than you need or to which you are entitled. Again, John the Baptist's words to the tax collectors are a sharp, wake-up call to us. Are we really satisfied that the ethics and practices both at our places of work and in all those areas which support the rest of our daily lives, for example, the retail, travel and entertainment sectors are really applying these principles. Or are 'hard profit' policies being applied which further down the chain are damaging the lives of suppliers and providers. Are people getting a living wage if I am buying a tin of tomatoes or a jumper at this low price? What is the environmental impact on countries far more vulnerable than Switzerland, for our incessant demand for products which need rare resources such as precious minerals?

'Don't extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation'. John's words to the soldiers who had power at their fingertips thanks to the Roman authorities – was 'Don't exploit it' – don't make others suffer unnecessarily because of your greed. It's an Advent challenge to us too – do we use the power, privilege and gifts that we have at our disposal to champion the needs of the weak and vulnerable? Or do we, in practice, use these gifts to ensure our lives are safe and comfortable regardless of what happens to others?

Above all, John the Baptist's message to the crowd is to face the reality of what God is calling of us. Look at the reality of our daily lives and what we need to do to prepare to meet Him. Be willing to be open to what we need to change, to repent and then actively take the steps we need to turn our lives around. To live out faith so that it 'bites' and resist the temptation to 'spiritualise' Christianity so that it wraps us in a spiritual blanket and renders us insensitive and blind to the needs of others.

John the Baptist ends his message to the crowd by pointing away from himself to the one who is coming, the one whose sandals he is unworthy to undo. His message clear for us today. Don't delay. Get ready!

**Amen**

**Canon Daphne Green**