

St Peter & St Paul, Farningham 13 December 2015, Luke 3 7-18

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

When morning breaks and it's time to rise and shine, is your clock radio set to stir you gently out of bed with soft music or are you rudely awakened and jarred out of bed with the loud clanging noises of an alarm clock? And as much as you would like to hit that snooze button for a couple more minutes of sleep on the clock radio, the loudness of your alarm clock quickly forces you out of bed.

Well, the direction our spiritual life takes can depend greatly on whether we are asleep or awake. For some people a gentle approach will awaken them to the fact that they are not on the right spiritual path. They will quickly realise this and change course. For others, more effort is needed to steer them in that direction.

Perhaps that is why God sent John the Baptist to proclaim the good news to the people. God didn't send a clock radio that would play soft soothing music. He sent a loud clanging and rude-awakening alarm clock. He wanted to be sure that all the people were awake. He didn't want them to hit the snooze button and miss the opportunity of getting the good news.

John didn't care about appearances. He had a goal to meet and he set about doing it in the only way he knew how. He didn't mince his words. He didn't use innuendos or double entendres to get his message across. He told it like it is. If you wanted to hear him preach, you had to go into the wilderness. And when you got there, you would be greeted with words like, "Brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" Produce fruit in keeping with repentance, and do not start telling yourself, "we have Abraham as our ancestor,". Calling people who have come to listen to you preach "a brood of vipers" isn't exactly a very pleasant way to greet anyone, is it? If a parish priest greeted his parishioners in this manner, his parish would soon be empty. Or would it? No don't go! Some of the things we expect to happen sometimes go in a direction we least expect. Such was the case with John the Baptist.

Jesus brought the good news of God's love. John the Baptist brought a message of terror, a proclamation of God's judgement. John's fellow Jews were certain that God had a most-favoured-nation clause in his contract with the human race. They believed that God would never condemn them, simply because they were

born Jewish. John declared that they were like slimy snakes slithering as fast as they could out of the path of an approaching forest fire. The only hope for them was to regard themselves as non-Jews, and they were expected to wash away their sins as a sign of their repentance.

It sounds strange to see, in the last verse of this Sunday's Gospel reading, the words "warnings" and "Good News" in the same sentence. But for John the Baptist there was no contradiction between warning people about their injustice and proclaiming the Good News of the coming One. Preparing for God's coming was not just about having some nice feeling in the heart, or agreeing with some theological ideas. Preparation for John was about changing every facet of life – attitudes, belief systems and behaviour. This remains true for us as we hear the Advent call to prepare our hearts and behaviour for the coming of Christ.

Luke tells us that among the crowds who travelled to the desert to hear John were the poor, tax collectors, and soldiers. These were the people who never make it onto the best guest lists! For the most part they are the kind of people we try to avoid, the people on the margins, the people who will abuse others if there is some money to be made, and the kind of people who are bullies and thugs.

Tax collectors were not hard-working civil servants in John's day; they were people who did the dirty work of collecting taxes for the Roman occupiers. They would extort as much as they could, turning over to the government the bulk, but keeping a healthy commission for themselves.

Soldiers were not the honoured and selfless military personnel who merit our respect today. Instead, these soldiers were local mercenaries who earned a modest income from preserving the peace, but supplemented their pay by exploiting people and stealing from them.

John's words to them were simple, and that is, perhaps, the good news in the lesson. Some in the crowd asked: "What should we do?" John told them: "Share with one another. If you have two coats, give one to someone who has none. If you have more food than you need give some away to feed those who are hungry. Demonstrate your faithfulness by living a life marked by generosity."

Tax collectors in the crowd shouted, "Teacher, what should we do?" - should we hand in our notice and look for a different job? No, said John. Don't give up the day job; do the same work as before - only do it well and honestly. Knowing

their reputation for cheating people, John replied simply: “Collect no more than the amount prescribed.” No bribery or corruption, and no cheating. Become known by all for your honesty and integrity. It’s surprising, even today that some people in positions of authority try to make a little bit on the side, and think nothing of it. But provided we are willing to abide by the rules, we can glorify God in any occupation, by doing it well to the best of our ability.

The soldiers in the multitude began to worry. Were they expected to resign from the army and become monks or preachers – for they sure as anything didn’t feel drawn to a religious life. They asked John: “And what should we do?” These soldiers had good reason to be nervous. They worked for the occupying forces, and they were feared for their brutality and extortion of the people. To the soldiers John said simply: “Be satisfied with your wages.”

The beauty of this passage is this: the crowds hear John describe things they could actually do. John does not require that they live in the desert, the way he was living, or that they leave their families. John simply invites them to join in God’s kingdom through acts of kindness here and now to be a blessing to others in response to the blessings they have received.

John’s message demanded at least three specific responses:

- Share what you have with those who need it
- Whatever your job, do it well and with fairness
- Be content with your earnings

John was not commissioned to bring comforting messages to those who lived sinful lives; he was calling the people to right living. What changes can we make in sharing what we have, doing our work honestly and well and being content with what we have?

Whatever we do in life we can do with kindness and generosity. In this season of giving we can make sure that we are sharing with those who truly need our help and assistance. If we are in business, we can conduct our affairs honestly with concern for the community. If we are raising children, we can raise them to love God by loving their neighbours. If we are students, we can learn everything we can and put it to good use. If we have time to spare, we can invest it in the welfare of others.

Our Gospel lesson began with a harangue from John, and it finishes with words of challenge and hope. I would like to close by encouraging you to reflect on the words of Paul in our Epistle from Philippians,

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. AMEN.