

SERMON 05.12.21 Luke 3 1-6, Philippians 1 3-11 - Revd Carol Harley

May my words be true to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The sheer drama of the ministry of John the Baptist is something we can easily miss when we read the Gospel records. Perhaps we are not very good at using our imagination but let's make no mistake about it, these events are worthy of all those adjectives bandied about today – amazing, fantastic, incredible. Focused on this weird figure, John the Baptist, a great tidal wave of religious feeling spread across the nation of Israel.

I love the way Saint Luke begins our Gospel story this morning. In verses 1-2 he very carefully spells out the names of all the political and religious big-wigs of the time, from Emperor Tiberius himself, through Pontius Pilate, Herod and his two family members, then on to Annas and Caiaphas the high-priests. Luke then informs us with simplicity, 'the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert'. As if to say: all right, these were the important people in the eyes of the world; but now I'm going to tell you about what really matters. When God decides to speak, everything else pales into insignificance.

So he spares us all that detail about the camel-hair tunic, the leather belt and the diet of locusts and wild honey, and plunges straight into the message of this extraordinary man, John the Baptist.

And what was the message? Well, John preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The key word is repentance. John challenges the people to a change of heart and mind, a reassessment of their actions and their attitudes. 'God is coming!' he proclaimed. 'Get ready! Get your lives in line with God. Repent!'

How rarely we hear talk like this, even from the pulpit, but surely it needs to be spoken again and again in our world today. The call to repentance is for a society who has turned away from God and is rapidly destroying the planet he has given us to live in. It's a call to get out of our rut and examine our lives.

John's brief ministry tells us most of what we need to know about repentance.

First, only repentance will save us from disaster. 'Picture a woodman', says John. 'He pauses a moment before tackling the next tree. He takes a deep breath and mops his brow, but the axe-blade lies menacingly against the roots of the tree. Any moment now and it will swing, and the tree will topple and so it is with the nation of Israel, it is doomed to destruction, and its only hope of reprieve is radical repentance.'

That thought is solemn enough, but John reinforces it with the reminder that even centuries of religious tradition and practice cannot prevent the disaster. ‘Do not begin to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our father”. God’s response to this would be ‘So what?’ – as it will also be to the army of people who trot out the familiar, ‘But I was christened as a child’, or ‘I always went to Sunday School’, or ‘I’ve been a churchgoer all my life’. God says ‘So what? Where is your repentance from the heart?’ So it will be too for the nation that smugly glories in its ‘Christian heritage’. ‘So what ?’

Second, says John, ‘*Let your repentance be expressed in baptism*’. To show they meant what they said, they were required to undergo this odd and slightly humiliating ritual. Baptism was not unknown to the Jews in John’s day, but it was mostly reserved for Gentiles who wanted to become Jews. After all Gentiles were considered to be dirty sinners, who needed to be washed. But John called the people of his own race to be baptised!

But thirdly – and by far the most important of all – *let your repentance show itself in transformed lives*. People can be baptised for all sorts of wrong reasons and so John warns the crowds who come: ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to escape from the coming wrath?’ Are you asking for baptism because you really are transformed inwardly? Or are you just like snakes that come slithering out of the forest ahead of the raging fire? Is this baptism just an insurance policy? Putting it bluntly, are you true converts or are you pathetic hypocrites? If it’s the second, please don’t imagine that this symbolic act will do you one scrap of good!

No. just as the proof of the pudding is in the eating, so the proof of the conversion is in the living. And so John calls the people *to change their ways, to share those things they had plenty of* with those who have little, to be fair and honest in their dealings. To be just, truthful and contented. In a way this sounds easy stuff compared with what we are to get soon from Jesus – but is it? To change the habits of a life-time is no small thing - during Lent have any of us tried to give up chocolate, or to stop biting our nails, or to curb our gossipy tongue? John is calling for REAL CHANGE, that’s for sure, and change which would be immediately noticeable to those around. Any form of religion which doesn’t show itself in compassion, truth, justice, kindness is a sham. So says John, and so said Jesus after him.

From time to time, perhaps, you see someone in the high street wearing a sandwich board: ‘Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand’. We laugh and pass him by cracking a joke at his expense. Some pathetic religious nut, we say. But, let’s be careful, John the Baptist was no model of conventional living, was he? The fact is the message may be true and vital, despite the eccentricity of the messenger.

Repent!! Or else!!

In the name of the Father, and of the son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.