

Advent 3 Luke 3:7-18

It's the 3rd Sunday of advent which means we are about halfway through the season. You can be forgiven for thinking we have already reached Christmas in terms of what we see around us, Christmas decorations cover homes, Christmas carols ring out in the shopping centres. Outside of the church it is as though advent doesn't exist and all of December is an extended celebration.

Some people get really cross about the commercialisation of Christmas, but there is no need to be one of them. We have no place telling everyone else how they must celebrate Christmas, we can make a different choice but we ought not inflict our choice on the rest of society. We can even be glad that Christmas is not irrelevant to the unchurched, that we still have a near nationwide celebration of Christmas gives us the opportunity to talk about it's true meaning whereas if we reclaim it and say only a church celebration is allowed, we will even further limit the opportunities we have to connect with people about the life and ministry of Jesus.

Anyway, we are at the 3rd Sunday of advent and our focus for this Sunday is John the Baptist. He made an appearance last week as we remembered the prophets but this Sunday is all about the Baptist. He came as a shock to the people, mention is made of the odd clothing he wore and the natural food he ate in the form of locusts and wild honey. Here was a man who had rejected everything society had to offer, he lived in the wilderness. His life hadn't supposed to go that way, John was the son of Zechariah, a temple priest, and as such he was of a priestly house within Judaism and would have been expected to have become a priest himself.

John certainly knew his scripture and from his very conception and birth as outlined in Luke's gospel, God was very active in John's life. So what happened? Well it's one of the great mysteries of the bible and a question we rarely ask. John went from priest in the making to wild man of the woods and we have no idea why. There is no story to tell of him having a spiritual epiphany although he must have had some experience to knock him off the well-worn path of following in his father's footsteps. We are not aware of how long he spent in the wilderness or what prompted him to begin preaching. We do know that John was God's messenger, long prophesied and could not have made it more obvious that he was the voice crying in the wilderness from the iconic prophesy of Isaiah that everyone knew to be a prophesy of a messiah coming to them.

So here was John, on the banks of the Jordan River, preaching a gospel of repentance. He was telling people that they could no longer rely on family ties to be children of God; that they must personally turn towards God as individuals and make space for him in their lives. They would turn to God by turning their backs on the worldly things which preoccupied them, possessions, money, power, greed. The temple leaders came to see what he was spouting, of course they wanted to know how this fitted in with orthodox Jewish teaching. John was ready for them, you brood of vipers, he calls them, who told you to come. A sign of things to come as John expresses his disdain for those who lead God's people and just like Jesus, he challenges the status quo.

Unsurprisingly John gets quite a name for himself and pretty soon people are starting to wonder, is he the one we were waiting for. He is fulfilling prophecies left, right and centre

so is he the messiah? John himself answers those questions with a resounding no. There is another who will come and I am not worthy to even tie his sandal, he says. Despite that, many people still followed John. We know from later gospel accounts that John continued to have disciples when Jesus was active in ministry. It was John's disciples who came to Jesus to ask if he was the messiah because John wasn't really certain himself. Jesus' disciples ask for training on how to pray because John had taught his disciples how to pray and they thought they should be doing that too. So there were plenty of people content to come to know God through John the Baptist, some who never followed Jesus.

But John the Baptist was clear about his mission, he was the one sent to prepare the way for the lord. He was the last of the prophets, he was the greatest of prophets. John laid aside every plan for his future, every human and societal responsibility and gave his life to God. He shunned comfort and the easy route for the wilderness and dangerous preaching, and ultimately he lost his life doing God's work.

Just like the current celebrations that are going on around us, the glitz the music and decorations are all in preparation for Christmas itself, so it was with John the Baptist. He looked a lot like Jesus, his message was one of repentance, of turning to God. He challenged the religious authorities just like Jesus would do throughout his ministry, having been educated through prayer and communing with God that these leaders were as corrupted by money, status and power as everyone else but in their case it was worse because they ought to have been above such things, living holy lives set apart for God. Yes, in many ways John the Baptist was just what the crowd were looking for, he ticked many boxes on the description of what the messiah would look like but a little more patience was required.

As we wait for the season of Christmas to be upon us again this year, we also wait for Jesus to come amongst us a second time, something for which we are always waiting, not just in advent. And in our waiting John the Baptist continues to have much to say to us. Just as with the people he taught along the river bank, we are already children of God. And just like those people of God we must not be complacent in that privileged position. As they were warned not to rely on being children of Abraham so must we not rely on any church structures or rituals like saying, I'm a communicant member of the Anglican Church, therefore I have my place assured, no, our relationship with God has to be real, living and current. Baptism into the church is not a one-time only event but the beginning of a lifelong relationship with God because that is how we get to develop and bear the fruits of the spirit, by constantly nurturing them.

John's practical advice on living out that relationship through sharing wealth and re-distribution of possessions, through honesty in all our dealings and through lives lived peacefully and without threatening others is as important today as it was when he first uttered the words. Greed, corruption, power, accumulation of possessions are all hallmarks of the world in which we live. It can feel hopeless to think about changing the world so it's difficult to even know where to begin but here is the most important message from John, begin with yourself. John preached a gospel of personal relationship with God which began with individual repentance. That message is still central today. You can only change you and I can only change me. May the words of the Baptist encourage, inspire and sustain you this advent season and as we wait for Christ to come again.