

Luke 3:7-18; Zephaniah 3:14-end; Philippians 4:4-7.
3rd Sunday of Advent: 13th December 2015
St. Andrew's Totteridge – 8:00 & 10:00 am

May the Lord now be in all our hearts, and upon my lips, that every thought and word may be wholly for the glory and honour of his name. Amen.

John baptizes for the forgiveness of sins any who are prepared to acknowledge their need of God's grace. The word has got round, and crowds descend upon his place of open-air baptism. And is he pleased? Gratified? Proud even? Not a bit of it. He greets them in a somewhat unexpected way - '[You brood of vipers!](#)' And I wonder, how would it be if I tried this out here at St. Andrew's? Perhaps at the Christmas Eve Midnight Eucharist, or on Christmas Day, always a crowd-puller, many of whom we will not see again until next Christmas. Maybe Easter. But if I did, I have no doubt that there would be many complaints. The Bishop's post-Christmas break would be disturbed by a great many letters. *People wouldn't like it.*

Perhaps that's why this Gospel reading is delivered today, the 3rd Sunday of Advent. The visitors aren't here yet - it's you, 'the regulars', 'the family', who have to bear the full brunt of John the Baptist's wrath: [You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance.](#) The sting, of course, is in that last sentence.

Apparently, there was once a parish priest who placed outside his church a great banner which read *This church is for sinners only!* And the great and the good of the town, led by the Churchwardens, got up a deputation to protest: they didn't want to be seen going into church under a slogan like that.

We live in a very silly world. Everyone is terrified of giving offence to anyone else, and all the fun and all the joy of the traditional English Christmas are being squeezed out of community after community (Canon Eric Woods). Did you

hear about how a C of E Christmas advertisement featuring a variety of people reciting lines of the Lord's Prayer, intended to be shown before the new Star Wars movie, was rejected last month by some cinemas? The ad had been approved by the BBFC, but rejected by Digital Cinema Media because it 'might cause offence to those of different faiths or none.' Of course, enemies of faith rub their hands with glee: whoever heard of an aggressive atheist being described as politically incorrect? They are the new Inquisition; the Secular Society and such-like, the new Torquemada. Anything that might cause offence to those of other faiths has to be banished.

But have any of these self-appointed guardians of the nation's conscience ever bothered to consult members of those 'other faiths' to ask if they are offended by the observation of one of Christianity's principle festivals? Of course not. That might disturb their prejudices, upset their PC-agendas. And that would never do. But if only they would listen, they would hear the leaders of the Moslem and Hindu and Sikh and other faith communities in this country asking themselves, *If the Church of England can be so readily ruled inappropriate, what safety, what security, have we? When Christianity in the UK is finally dead and buried, who will the secularists target next?* It is an increasingly relevant question.

But I'm straying from the text. John the Baptist wasn't addressing Religion's enemies but the 'religious' themselves. That means you and me. We – not them out there, but **we** – are the brood of vipers. How are we going to respond? Do we have a future? John the Baptist's message suggests that perhaps we'd better not count on it: [Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.](#)

Much of the NT was written, and the Church founded, by men who believed that the end of the world was not far off. Both St Paul and St Peter believed, that ‘the end of all things is upon us’. They didn’t just get that from the Lord’s cousin, John the Baptist, but from the Lord himself, who taught the importance of always being ready and prepared and watchful for the end, which will come as unexpectedly as a thief in the night.

But truth comes in many forms, and the NT is given less to *foretelling* (in a crystal-gazing sort of way) than to *forthtelling*. There is no panic or hysteria in the NT but there **is** this radical call to repentance. And the meaning of repentance in the Greek is much the same as the manoeuvre you are forbidden to carry out on motorways: the U-turn. Long ago Margaret Thatcher delighted a Tory Party Conference with her words, *You turn if you want to. The lady’s not for turning*. And of course that gave many Vicars their next Sunday sermon, because Christians are precisely people for turning. Turning to Christ. Turning away from sin. Turning backs upon evil.

Which is exactly what the Service of Baptism asks of the candidate, or his or her sponsors: *Do you turn to Christ? Do you repent of your sins? Do you renounce evil?* You and I have answered in the affirmative to all those questions, or have in Confirmation endorsed the answers our parents and Godparents gave on our behalf. Advent calls us back to our first allegiance, our prime duty. To repent, and to lead lives that bear fruits worthy of repentance.

Towards the very end of his life, and in great pain, a priest called Michael Mayne put together these words, an assurance of a future for everyone, and provides this sermon’s ending:

Each one of us is frail and vulnerable; too often we are to be discovered sitting in the doctor’s waiting room, or lying in a hospital bed or on a psychiatrist’s couch, crying out for healing. Crying out to be seen, not chiefly as a set of interesting symptoms or a machine requiring repair, but as a person, with all that word implies. Four hundred years ago John Donne wrote this in his Devotions:

‘We study Health, and we deliberate upon our meats, and drink, and air, and exercises, and we hew, and we polish every stone that goes to that building; and so our health is a long and regular work; But in a minute a Cannon batters all, overthrows all, demolishes all; a Sickness unprevented for all our diligence, unsuspected for all our curiosity; nay, undeserved, if we consider only disorder, summons us, seizes us, possesses us, destroys us in an instant.’

Twice in my life this has happened to me. I have been knocked flat, trapped by illness and wonderfully diminished. But that reality conjures up the dominant story in the Christian life, its great redeeming truth: that of the wounded healer; the one made incarnate and laid low, sharing our vulnerability, our encounter with mystery, our Job-like search for answers; the one who encounters our mystery and himself enters into our troubled questions. And in this light, we are helped to see light; and to endure.

[Michael Mayne, The Enduring Melody, DLT 2006, p242]

And for all of that, thanks be to God. Amen.

Zephaniah 3.14-20

A Song of Joy

¹⁴ Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!
¹⁵ The Lord has taken away the judgments against you,
he has turned away your enemies.
The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst;
you shall fear disaster no more.
¹⁶ On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
Do not fear, O Zion;
do not let your hands grow weak.
¹⁷ The Lord, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;
he will rejoice over you with gladness,
he will renew you in his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing
¹⁸ as on a day of festival.
I will remove disaster from you,
so that you will not bear reproach for it.
¹⁹ I will deal with all your oppressors
at that time.
And I will save the lame
and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise
and renown in all the earth.
²⁰ At that time I will bring you home,
at the time when I gather you;
for I will make you renowned and praised
among all the peoples of the earth,
when I restore your fortunes
before your eyes, says the Lord.

Philippians 4.4-7

4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made

known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Luke 3:7-18

⁷ John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.'

¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, 'What then should we do?' ¹¹In reply he said to them, 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.' ¹²Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?' ¹³He said to them, 'Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.'

¹⁴Soldiers also asked him, 'And we, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.'

¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, '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 sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His winnowing-fork is 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.'

¹⁸ So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

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