

Sermon December 12th 2021 : Luke 3 : 7 - 18

I was imagining that John the Baptist came to visit us at St Marks, and I wondered what it would be like to welcome him here? He would certainly look a strange figure, standing here in his camel skin coat and belt. I am not sure that his hosts in Newnham would have been able to give him what he usually ate for breakfast.

John was the son of a priest, Zechariah. He had renounced the comforts of life in his parents' community: had turned his back on them by going to stay in the desert. So what would he say to us? Would he launch straight into us with ferocious phrases - 'You brood of vipers'? (By the way Matthew's gospel had him saying that specifically to some Scribes and Pharisees, those especially religious people, who came to see him). Or would John tailor his message to this quiet and polite audience. No. I don't think so somehow. I think he would make us feel uncomfortable. Nothing would restrain him.

John's ministry was conducted in and around the River Jordan. We can imagine him turning up outside small towns and villages and the word would go round 'The prophet is here'. The people would come out - even from as far away as Jerusalem - and would run down to the river to listen to him. There was indeed something compelling about John. It was not surprising that a lot of them were moved by his preaching.

John was not just addressing crowds of individuals. He saw himself as talking to the whole nation of Israel. He would have been recognised as playing the role of the prophets, as in the Old Testament. He even deliberately dressed like them. He was urged on by a sense of judgement coming towards his nation: what he called 'the coming wrath'. In Luke we can see that his preaching had three themes : repentance, producing fruit (or Godly character), and the arrival of one who was to come bringing a baptism by fire.

Repentance

In last week's gospel we read that his message could be summed up as offering "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (v.3). There is no doubt that it was the people's spiritual state that was concerning him - not social, not economic, not political. Their spiritual state.

A call for national repentance: I wonder how that would go down in Cambridge? People in this country who go around in public with placards saying "Repent" are just laughed at here. Is that how people in England would react to John? Maybe a Christian congregation, which does confess its sin every week, would give John a hearing? So how would we respond? Would we agree that we, and our fellow-citizens, are in need of repentance?

John's preaching began with a faith in the idea of a relationship with a Divine Father. Jews thought of themselves as a people especially chosen and blessed by God. This was the basis of their national identity. In fact, I think that is not so far from what we British have thought, especially in the past. Each year we happily sing 'Was Jerusalem builded here' and we don't think then that we are singing about a capital in a foreign country. But the Jews of John's time were familiar with the idea of repentance, in a way that, I think, 21st British people are

not. Given British culture at the present time, I wonder whether we as a society really think that **we** do not have anything to repent of?

This gospel reading is very much to do with Jewish identity. John claimed that many people based their identity on the fact that they were ethnically Jewish. They were the “children of Abraham”. But John was not satisfied with that, for couldn’t God simply create for himself children of Abraham in any way He wanted to? So, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

To the Jews the true and wonderful thing was that repentance would lead to God’s forgiveness. Notice that in verse 18 Luke describes John’s preaching as ‘good news’. We often hear it said nowadays that in our society there is too little forgiveness. The news that we humans can be forgiven, no matter what we have done, is surely at the root of the good news of the Christian gospel.

As a response the people allowed John to baptise them in the river Jordan. That was a sign that they wanted a new start. Indeed that is what repentance meant – to turn around and face in a completely different direction. To be baptised was to make a public statement that their life as Jewish believers had not been good enough. There was though the possibility of public humiliation, for baptism in those days was reserved for those foreigners who had begun to worship the God of the Jews and who wished to demonstrate their new faith.

Fruitfulness

The second part of John’s message was about fruitfulness. The true Jewish identity depended on in how faithfully they lived out their special relationship with God. Their lives were supposed to be fruitful. That was an old Testament metaphor, one which was well understood in an agricultural community. John reminded the people that it was life-styles that were consistent with their faith in God which would make them truly Jewish.

But as we think of the identity of Jewish people at the time of John the Baptist and Jesus, we might start to think about ourselves. About our identity not as British, or other nationalities, but as Christians. Compared to our society the Jewish society of the first century was a highly religious one, but for John the Baptist even they were missing the point.

When they were at their best they believed that God required them to live out their faith in their communities, to serve those they lived amongst. For example, those who were given the job of collecting money for the government, they must ensure that the right amounts were collected. Others had roles which gave them power over people, like the soldiers or the police. They must not bully people. Those two are fairly easy examples for us, but what about the next ones which were aimed at those who have enough of this world’s goods, like clothes and food. John says we must be ready to share with those who do not have enough of these things. This was John’s challenge to the Jewish people of his day, and I am thinking that it would be his challenge to us today. Only in that way would people be living out what God had put them on earth for.

How would we stand up in the face of these challenges? They describe what should be our Christian identity, not simply because it will gain us benefit in our society. We should act like

that because that is the way God wishes us to live. And because His Word has taught us that all human beings are precious in his sight, and made in His image.

Baptism of fire

Thirdly, John also pointed to an experience which he could not give but which, he said, could only be given by someone who was to come. This was what he called, in a very striking phrase, “a baptism of fire”. John’s baptism was in water, but the one who was to come would bring a baptism of fire.

Fire has been mentioned in this passage already. That is the fire in the farm where the dead branches of unfruitful tree are thrown. It was very much a picture of endings. But the idea of a baptism suggests a new start, the beginning of plans and actions, the start of a new way of living. A baptism of fire suggests energy and commitment and enthusiasm .

The image of fire for the Jews was closely associated with the nature of God, as it was for Moses when he came across a burning bush in the desert. John said that when Jesus appeared He would make it possible for humans to come close to God. Jesus would bring the people close to Him and thus enable them to live lives of energy and enthusiasm. To be baptised by fire is to have the light of God shining within us. Fire, and the light and warmth that it brings, become a very striking image of the presence of God. John Wesley on the evening of May 24th 1738 had been listening to someone reading a commentary about the Epistle to the Romans. He reported that at about a quarter to nine “I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death”.

The word ‘enthusiasm’ reminded me of the Methodists in England. At first Wesley was laughed at as an ‘enthusiast’ by significant groups in the Anglican church. Even the name ‘Methodist’ began as a critical one. They were too ‘happy clappy’ and they tended to be less educated and more working class than many Anglican congregations. Yet the Methodist revival enabled significant sections of the British people to find a Christian faith. They established fellowships to enable them to live fruitful lives within their communities.

A few weeks ago the broadcaster Andrew Marr did a BBC programme about the future of Christianity in the world. The conversation turned to the need of the church of England to appeal more to younger people and also to a wider range of the communities in Britain. One of the people involved in the discussion was an Anglican priest, a woman who is now chaplain to the Speaker of the House of commons. So, how did the Anglican church compare with other denominations? There was no suggestion that it needed to water down its gospel to make it more acceptable to our secular society. And it was agreed that what people are looking for is the old message of salvation and peace with God and a challenge for total commitment. What young people want from church was said to be:

1. Fervent worship:
2. Being open about their faith: personal authenticity
3. Faith for daily living in terms of character (fruit)
4. ‘Giving themselves’ to help others: service
5. Hope: the gospel of Resurrection. AMEN