

The unlikely Messenger
Luke 3:7-18, Philippians 4:4-7

13 December 2015

Well, here we are again, in the company of John the Baptist. You might have thought that we've heard all we needed to hear about him last Sunday, but through the Lectionary the Church in its wisdom makes us devote two Sundays to this most unlikely character of the Advent season. We are so ready for the 'angels' singing', 'oxen lowing', and 'shepherds keeping vigil', that we don't really want to be detained by this outlandish figure with his jarring message of fire and brimstone, which Luke, the Gospel writer surprisingly calls 'good news'. At a recent council meeting of one of our parent denominations we were told that the new way of communicating the Gospel is through social media. Now this is the media where with a click of a button everyone can say whether they 'like' or 'not like' the message. We may wonder how many 'likes' or 'not like's John the Baptist would get?

Or, for that matter, how would any ordinary congregation react if their preacher with a view addressed them as 'vipers' brood'? And continued in the style of the Baptist as paraphrased in the Message Bible, saying: "Brood of snakes! What do you think you are doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskin is going to deflect God's judgement?" Clearly, this thundering preacher is not one of your average Christmas salesmen trying to sweet talk you into buying that absolutely essential new sofa or giant TV screen that could be delivered before Christmas. Neither is he a politician or any aspiring leader, who carefully matches his words to whatever the popular opinion of the day is. He simply does not care how he is received. He says what he feels needs saying and he is picking up his illustrations from his familiar environment (as most preachers do!). Living in the desert he must have known a thing or two about slithering snakes!

But why should we bother about him? After all, as a fellow minister said the other day, 'he got it all wrong, anyway'. Well, did he though? From our Bible passage today the answer is that 'he did' and 'he didn't'. Along with his many fellow-countrymen John was also faithfully awaiting the arrival of the promised liberator, or Messiah, God's own Anointed. The people of God were in dire straits at the time. The Roman occupation weighed heavily upon them. The

political and religious leadership were corrupt and collaborated with the foreign occupiers, the gap between rich and poor were getting wider every day, marauding violent groups were inciting the people to rise up and fight back. The whole system was creaking at the seams and ready for the Great Divine Cleanup and for the appearance of a Divine Cleaner-Upper. Big debates were brewing about how it would happen. Who would be the One to come? Who would be in and who would be out in the new order? Of course, most people thought they would be 'in', but they were still wondering what would happen to those who would be 'out'. And so, in a sense, my minister friend was right: John the Baptist did get it wrong about the Divine Cleanup, as well as the nature of the Divine Cleaner-Upper and about how he would operate.

But, in everything else John didn't get it wrong. He was right in recognising the *kairos*, the right time, the opportune moment of God's decisive action. He was right in calling people to repentance, to an inner change of direction, and most importantly he was right about the kind of life that would be the sign of the new order, and would, in fact, bring about that new order. He could see that no new order was possible while some people hoarded things and others were needy, which is true for our days too. That dishonest administration had no place in the promised dominion, which again is true for our days too. That power politics would never lead to peace, and how true that is for our days too? And in all of this he was in perfect harmony with the One whose arrival he announced, Jesus of Nazareth.

And in fact, he may have even been more than just an announcer, he may have been (whether knowingly, or unknowingly) a kind of mentor to Jesus. After thirty years in obscurity, there must have been some outside trigger to awaken and galvanise Jesus in the growing conviction of his tremendous calling. For my way of thinking, if that were the case, it would be a more realistic reason for him to get baptized by John, than some of the later, more theological explanations of the early Church. Having started his own ministry and learning about John's execution, Jesus later moved away from the followers of John, he developed a larger vision, a radically different view, in which the love and grace of God were the dominant features. Yet he never lost his great respect for his early teacher and with all his faults declared him 'the greatest among all who have ever been born'. (Matt 11:11)

Some of today's Advent messages come from our Advent picture (*John the Baptist* by Dinah Roe Kendall), in which two features stand out: the widely open mouth of this unlikely messenger and his larger than life finger pointing away from himself. Those who believe and await a new order cannot keep silent, they are to speak out. The period of Advent is not just for quiet, inner preparation, it is also a time for meaningful communication; A time to share our experiences of faith, our inner convictions with those who would listen. And to do this in a totally selfless way, not kow-towing to popular opinions, not benefiting from any little position of our power, but resolutely pointing to Jesus, the inaugurator of the new order, which the Bible calls the Kingdom of God.

But the story of John the Baptist also alerts us to another important point, which is quite a sobering one: however convinced we are of the faith we profess, it may be wise to keep in mind that we may not have got all of it right; That our insights, like everyone else's are only partial. That's why we need each other, that's why Jesus needed John perhaps to set him on his way and John needed Jesus to re-assess some his own understanding. If we are the proclaimers, there is always the possibility that, those who listen to us may not take everything on board they heard from us. This is fine, no need to fret about it, we are not infallible after all. And if we are the listeners, we are still responsible for those parts of the message we do take on board. The story of John the Baptist and Jesus encourage us not to sit on 'received wisdom'; we are called to include it, but also to transcend it. That is why it is so good to have a Life & Faith group in our church, which currently discusses and hopefully takes further the insights of the sermons preached from this pulpit. The good news is that the Spirit of God is alive and working in all of us and though individually we may not be able to possess the whole truth about God, about ourselves or about the great questions of life, from the little bits of our knowledge and experience the Mighty Spirit is weaving the overall pattern we can safely follow together.

And there is more good news to be had today. In our second reading we heard some words of the Apostle Paul, which form part of his letter to his much-loved congregation in Philippi. Though not in the few verses we read, but in his introduction to his letter, Paul says something rather similar we've just been talking about. He is fully aware that what he was able to teach the Philippians was only the

beginning. His prayer for his friends now is that they keep developing in their faith, that 'their love may grow ever richer in knowledge and insight of every kind, enabling them to learn by experience what things really matter'. (*Phil 1: 9*) The Apostle's situation was pretty bad at the time, he was writing from a dark cell of a prison, yet his call for rejoicing was so potent that it lent itself to be included and indeed to shape the Church's Advent journey down the ages. The third Sunday in Advent has become known as *Gaudete* Sunday, meaning the day of rejoicing. So, notwithstanding the stern message of John the Baptist we are also called to make our preparations with rejoicing and to proclaim the foretaste of the Christmas joy to come. The arrival of the new baby is the symbol of a new understanding: God is not a God of vengeance. This baby will grow up not to retaliate, but to forgive, not to be served but to serve others, not to judge and condemn 'sinners' to death, but to die himself for the sake of peace and reconciliation. He too ask for repentance but he will also show that God doesn't just love a repentant sinner; God loves and heals the unrepentant sinner too. (*Good Goats by Dennis Linn, Sheila F Linn, Matthew Linn, 1994*). This may not be such good news for 'the righteous', but it's sure to be really good news for most of us.

Rejoicing, of course, is not the result of the 'pursuit of personal happiness', in a way it's almost the opposite. If our goal is to strive to achieve happiness in the accepted sense, we may take our eyes off the true goal. The ability to rejoice amidst even the darkest moments of life is a gift, a side-product, if you like, of the pursuit of a Christ-shaped life. An inclusive life devoted to healing and justice, to service and to peace. My wish and my prayer is that we may find this kind of joy through our Advent preparations as we look forward to remembering and celebrating once more the arrival of the baby in Bethlehem.