

## Sermon – Luke 3: 7-18

‘You brood of vipers! Yes, you, you, you and you!’

Now don't worry, I haven't slipped over the edge. At least I hope I haven't. Hellfire and damnation preaching has gone out of fashion, at least it has in the Church of England, and a good thing too. And I have no desire or intention whatsoever of attempting a revival. But John's listeners probably thought exactly the same as you were perhaps thinking just a moment ago. Where on earth is this guy coming from?

They had come out to be with John of their own free will. Maybe they had lost a day's pay to do so. They might have journeyed many weary miles. Certainly no one had forced them to come. And by coming they had already acknowledged their own sinfulness and their need and desire for repentance. For as we heard last week John had openly been preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins in all the country around the Jordan. It was surely why they had all come out to be baptised by him.

And John greets them with a full frontal broadside. I can imagine how shocked and uncomfortable I would have been if I had been there. You probably felt something of the sort just a few moments ago.

And I think the reason John deliberately wanted to shock and stun his listeners was because of the sort of message he had for them. It was not a comfortable, easy-going, pay half-attention message. It was a full-on, stratospherically important, 'you need to hear this' message. It needed their full, undivided, complete attention. And the very same is true for us here today.

John is quite explicit. 'I baptise you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His 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'. O my goodness me. O golly gosh. If I had been present to hear **these** words, and was already feeling somewhat shocked and uncomfortable at how John had started off, I think I'm going to be feeling a lot more uncomfortable now. In fact I think my anxiety levels might have reached an all-time high.

In these four weeks of the Advent season, with deeply felt hope and anticipation we prepare to celebrate the joy of the incarnation at Christmas. Of Emmanuel, God with us. That once-for-all nativity when God became present here on earth. When in Jesus, God's Word was made flesh and lived here on earth amongst us.

But the church's tradition and teaching is that in Advent we are each asked to prepare for much, much more than just the anniversary of the physical human birth of Jesus. As if that were not enough!

We are also called on to look forward in hope to Christ becoming present here and now. To his very real advent in each of our hearts. The real presence of Christ deep within each one of us. Changing and moulding us in his image right now.

And thirdly we **are** called to look ahead to His sure and certain final coming. When He appears in glory as the just but merciful judge of all at the end of time.

And whilst John's stark description of that final coming might still have been ringing in his hearers ears, and making them feel very uncomfortable; just as those words might still be making us now feel somewhat uncomfortable; when John is asked several times 'What then should we do?' he offers what at first glance seems to be some utterly surprising advice.

After announcing with vim and vigour impending fire and judgement, John's actual counsel as to what his listeners should get on and do about it seems so ordinary, so mundane. To the crowds he says 'share'. To the tax collectors 'be fair'. To the soldiers 'don't bully'. Share, be fair, don't bully. Somehow this feels more like the stuff of teaching kindergarten children to get on with each other than advice on how to avoid eternal damnation when the apocalypse arrives. Can this be right? Can this really be right?

For if it is true, isn't it such absolutely wonderful, wonderful good news? The 'fruits worthy of repentance' that John calls upon his listeners to bear; which will turn away everlasting separation from God; which will lead us into the eternal presence of the Almighty; turn out to be things that we can actually get on with and do in our daily lives, if we have a will and desire to do so. John is not setting us an impossible task or target.

And surely, surely, neither is Christ.

Christ came to us that first Christmas in love, not in wrath or anger. In love so deep and wide that we cannot begin to understand it. He came as a helpless babe, to grow up as infant, toddler, child, adolescent and adult. He experienced with us the full nature and range of the human condition. He felt all our deepest joys and sorrows. He knew all our frailties and our weaknesses.

He will not come as a remote, austere, unfeeling, terrifying judge, but as a friend, a companion, a fellow traveller on the way, as one of us. As a shepherd, gently leading and guiding us into the ways of peace and the paths of righteousness. He will not make the task he has set us impossible to achieve. A way to walk in that we cannot follow.

It may be difficult and long, and take courage and fortitude; and it might seem impossible to complete the journey if we rely on ourselves alone. But we are not alone. We are not alone. Christ is with us every step of the way. Surely He is with us. Supporting us when we stumble. Fortifying us when we feel weary. Guiding us when we have lost the path.

And so in this Advent season my earnest hope for those of us here; for all Christian people; and for all people of good will in this world; is that we will all find it possible to invite Christ more and more fully into our hearts in the here and now. That his advent within us will guide us all into bringing forth in this world those 'fruits worthy of repentance' that John calls for.

That acts of kindness, generosity, selflessness and charity will make this world a better place. And that by Christ working in this way through us we may all become worthy at the end of time to stand before Him on His heavenly throne and be numbered amongst His flock.

It is time for us to wake out of sleep, for deliverance is nearer to us now than it was when first we believed. It is far on in the night; day is near. Let us therefore cast off the deeds of darkness and put on our armour as soldiers of the light.

Amen.