

Preparing for Christ (1)

3rd Sunday of Advent - Canon Neil Patterson

Zephaniah 3.14-end, Philippians 4.4-7, Luke 3.7-18

I have not preached to you for a few weeks, but the vagaries of the rota mean that I am down for both today and next Sunday morning. So, looking at the readings, it seemed to make sense to connect the two, to make this a two-parter. Of course, I recognise that some of you will have gone to see family by next week, or are here for a one-off, and that there will be people next week who didn't hear either, so each will make sense on its own terms.

But there is an ulterior motive as well as the opportunity to spread a theme across two Sundays. Christ calls us to celebrate his risen life each and every Sunday. If you like what you heard this morning then maybe you will be more sure to be here next week, and able to resist the feeling that actually you were going to come to Nine Lessons and Christmas morning so maybe we could just skip Sunday 22nd!

So what are the two readings that have inspired this link-up? Well, today we have just had the fiery preaching of John the Baptist, laying into his audience with the sort of introduction that is no longer common from Christian pulpits – at least, not in my experience. John savages his listeners, gives them some clear advice (to which I shall return) and explains that he is only the forerunner of the one who is to come.

Next week, we shall hear more closely of that one who is to come in the Gospel reading of Mary visiting Elizabeth, including the words of the Magnificat that are sung or recited here every evening of the year – the words that speak of the actual presence of Christ in his mother's womb, and the transforming impact of that presence. What I want to reflect on this week and next is this pairing of how we can prepare (following John's preaching) and how we must receive the gift of Christ. Natural and supernatural preparation, if you will – both are needed, but need to be approached differently.

It might seem that today's readings are a bit of a contrast. Zephaniah tells the people to sing aloud, for everything is going to be all right. Paul in Philippians tells us to rejoice in the Lord, and not to worry but 'take it to the Lord in prayer' to use the words of that cheesy but perhaps not wholly reassuring hymn. But John

the Baptist greets us with “you brood of vipers!” Already heading fast for a poor rating on Ship of Fools or TripAdvisor, he goes on to a particularly savage pun that God will raise up ‘son from the stones,’ challenging the Jewish identity of his hearers, rooted in birth among the chosen race (it works properly if you put it in Aramaic, which he was probably speaking). Those of you who know Stella Gibbons’s *Cold Comfort Farm* may feel we are approaching the parody of the ‘Quaking Brethen’ who gather to hear a sermon that begins, “Ye’re all damned!”

But the real surprise that turns the sermon on its head (John the Baptist’s, not mine!) is the response of the crowd. We spend quite a lot of time with the Old Testament prophets at this time of year, and those who came to my Bible for Beginners, or who heard Rowan Williams last weekend, or who just know their Bibles well as many of you do, will recall that prophets mostly get a rather poor response rate. They tend not to get, ‘ooh, good point, I’ll sort my life out’ but rather ‘go away, you’re spoiling the fun.’ And this remains painfully true for many of the prophets of our own time who rightly call out the impact of our consumerist world on the precious Earth that God has given us.

But this crowd, for once, is different, and asks, “What then should we do?” And this produces, only in Luke’s version of John’s preaching, a rather surprising reaction. It’s almost as if John was stopped in his tracks as he was thinking up another vicious metaphor: “You’re all...sorry? ...you want to know what to do differently? ...you want to change? ...erm, well, give to the poor and share with people who haven’t got enough, that sort of thing.” The advice is so simple and clear as to be refreshing after the apocalyptic tone of the warnings.

The advice to tax-collectors and soldiers is also striking in context, not least because they were there at all. Tax collection in the ancient world was mostly managed by ‘tax farming’ – that is, the government would invite bids for collecting the taxes for a particular region or town, and sell the right to collect to the highest bidder. The successful bidder would then have a strong incentive to collect as ruthlessly as possible to maximise his profit, and so not for nothing was likely to be resented. And the soldiers of the Roman occupation will have been under constant temptation to make a gain on their posting. We live in a society and a country in which, thank God, tax collection and military service are both well regulated and honest, though that is far from the case across the world.

That those who have two coats or enough food must share it is simple, but perhaps not quite so easy to achieve. We live in a different world from John the

Baptist and his audience. Whereas the taxes collected in ancient Judea probably paid for little more than armies and royal palaces, ours pay for education, hospitals and social security, and I hope we agree that is a very good thing. And we all, I trust and pray, give voluntarily to charity as well. But we live in a society where income inequality has been steadily growing for the majority of my lifetime, and continues to do so.

At this point I am well aware that I am teetering on the edge of politics, and that there will be a variety of perspectives among us all that are not easily reconciled. But I want to just do a bit of observation. We are in the early stages of a new Government that has determined (rightly or wrongly I am not going to say) that certain taxes – employers National Insurance, inheritance tax on land – are going to rise. And what we see, totally unsurprisingly, is that there is a reaction from those affected. We have not yet seen tractors blockading the streets of Bristol, but it may only be a matter of time. I look forward to the day when there is a news story “taxpayer welcomes tax rise” but I fear it isn’t coming any time soon.

Because it is, quite simply, human nature to think otherwise. The essence of John the Baptist’s message, that to do the work of God we need to strive to overcome the inequalities that arise in every society, is as current today as ever. But there is always a reason why it doesn’t apply to me – I’ve got children to support, or a mortgage to pay, or am cash-poor even when I’m asset-rich, or whatever it is. I really am not getting at any specific group because the reality is that we all tend to do it before we even think about it.

And this is the hinge of the two sermons. Whether in readiness for Christ’s first coming in Judea long ago, or in response to the needs of our world today, what God asks of us in life is not so complicated, but it is not easy to do. Because we cannot do it in our own strength. That is why, as I shall say much more next week, we needed the Saviour who came at the first Christmas. For it is he, not us, who makes it possible to bring down the mighty from their seat, raise up the lowly, and fill the hungry with good things.