

### **3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent: Zephaniah 3.14-20; Philippians 4.4-7; Luke 3.7-18**

There seems to be a lot of anxiety around at the moment. Anxiety about our political life and place in the world. Anxiety about our economy. About people's job security and standards of living. About crime and policing. Health and education. We worry about the environment. About global warming and the effects of pollution. About conflicts in the world and about international terrorism. And at the more personal level we have unprecedented levels of mental illness in our society. People are suffering from depression and anxiety and many are on medication. Things seem to be seriously out of kilter and many are searching for answers.

There was a similar sense of anxiety in John the Baptist's time. People had a feeling that things were not right. The country was being ruled by gentile invaders and it was going to the dogs. People were looking for answers and they flocked to John the Baptist, hoping he could make sense of what was happening. They sought baptism in the River Jordan.

Baptism had been a ritual that Gentiles had to undergo if they wanted to become Jews. Here it became a way in which they could renew their identity God's people. A sign of repentance. But baptism by itself was not enough. John had little to say in the way of comfort. He called them a brood of vipers. The issues they faced were not just national ones they were about individual salvation and he warned them to bear fruit worthy of repentance. They had taken their status as children of Abraham for granted for too long. They needed to change and bear good fruit.

When I was working in Egypt, my church was dedicated to St John the Baptist. We commissioned an icon of the baptism of Jesus by John from a local Coptic nun. And when it arrived we were delighted with what she had painted. It showed Jesus and John the Baptist at the river Jordan. And there were little red fish swimming around Jesus' feet. But in the corner of the icon there was a small tree with an axe next to it. And it was there because both John and Jesus warned that an axe is at the root of the tree, and every tree that does not produce good fruit would be cut down and thrown into the fire.

The crowds asked John for specifics. What should we do? He told those who have two sets of clothes to share them with those who have none. Those who have plenty of food to share it with those who have none. Tax gatherers came to him asking what they should do. In those days tax gathering was privatised. It was farmed out to the highest bidders. And tax collectors exploited their position and abused the poor. And they were reviled for it. John told them to collect no more than they were supposed to. Soldiers likewise were not extort money out of vulnerable civilians. This was how people could bear good fruit.

It was good advice then and it is good advice now. We know that there are people on our streets and in our communities who are cold this winter. People who do not have enough clothes. Many of us have wardrobes full with clothes that we will probably not wear again. Things that no longer fit us or that have perhaps gone out of fashion. Now might be a good time to have a clear out and take a trip to the charity shop. I am grateful to everyone who supports the food bank and especially those who have provided extra things for Christmas.

The issue of tax is as live now as it was in John's time. Tax gatherers seem to be fairly innocent these days but many companies and wealthy individuals always seem to find ways of avoiding tax. We might want to bear this in mind when we consider where we spend our money. Thankfully, our soldiers don't go round exploiting other people but there is a real need for integrity and care for the most vulnerable in our society.

The issues facing our world are real and can seem overwhelming. As individuals we can feel very powerless to address them. But John helpfully shows us that we can all do our bit. We can all do something to address the challenges that we face. Repentance isn't just an abstract thing but can be expressed in small ways. In acts of generosity. In changes to our patterns of consumption. Or perhaps just in changes to our outlook.

What interests me this morning though is motivation. John the Baptist was sure that judgement was coming. If you think I'm tough, he said, just wait till the messiah arrives. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing-floor and gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

Our Gospel ends by saying, 'And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them.' But it doesn't always sound like good news. There is a strong sense of fear in John's message and fear is a powerful motivator. Many today seem to be operating out of a position of fear.

But in fact when Jesus did come, his message was less apocalyptic than John's had been. Jesus was the good cop after John's bad cop. Though Jesus talked about axes as John did he also talked of love, forgiveness, healing. Of people being blessed rather than being sinful. Jesus saw the good in people and told them that the kingdom of God was among them. He sought to motivate people out of love, not fear. Perfect love casts out fear and we are called to be people of love rather than anxiety.

Jesus' message seems much closer to that in our other two readings. In our reading from the prophet Zephaniah we have a strong sense of God's compassion for a hurting world. The Lord would take away its punishment. He is mighty to save. He would rescue the lame and gather those who had been scattered and bring them home.

In the birth of Jesus he would come not as an unquenchable fire but as a tiny baby. Vulnerable and poor. Identifying himself with a bruised humanity in need of love.

Our reading from Philippians takes this even further. 'Rejoice' Paul says, 'And again I say, Rejoice. The Lord is near. Do not be afraid. This is good news. Do not worry about anything. Do not be fearful. We cannot add a single span to lives by worrying. Anxiety is not life-giving. It is not life in all its fullness. Instead of worrying, says Paul, pray. Pray always. Tell God your deepest longings. Seek his will for your lives. And if we can rejoice. If we can celebrate. If we can pray, then the peace of God will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

As we await the coming of the Saviour we are called to look for light in darkness. To be people of hope and expectation. And to live joyful lives, celebrating God's love. Amen.

