

CUTTING EDGE CAMELOT, No 137

Sunday 12th December 2021

‘Virtually Church but with some way to go...’

Welcome

Welcome to this edition of Cutting Edge Camelot. In Advent we continue to look at the ministry of John the Baptist.

Scripture Passage

Zephaniah 3: 14-20

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!

Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!

¹⁵ The LORD has taken away the judgments against you,
he has turned away your enemies.

The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;
you shall fear disaster no more.

¹⁶ On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:

Do not fear, O Zion;
do not let your hands grow weak.

¹⁷ The LORD, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;

he will rejoice over you with gladness,
he will renew you in his love;

he will exult over you with loud singing

¹⁸ as on a day of festival.

I will remove disaster from you,

so that you will not bear reproach for it.

¹⁹ I will deal with all your oppressors
at that time.
And I will save the lame
and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise
and renown in all the earth.
²⁰ At that time I will bring you home,
at the time when I gather you;
for I will make you renowned and praised
among all the peoples of the earth,
when I restore your fortunes
before your eyes, says the LORD.

Luke 3: 7-18

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹ Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?”

¹¹ In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.”

¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?”

¹³ He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.”

¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?”

He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ 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.”

¹⁸ So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Reflection

In a symphony there are many different notes. But they all come together to form a whole. But what would what happen if you isolated two random notes from the symphony and then listened to both side by side? Might you wonder whether they could possibly belong to the same piece of music?

John the Baptist was known for his harsh and ascetic lifestyle. He lived in the wilderness and ate locusts and wild honey. And his message too was at all times a tough and direct one.

But in the symphony of notes that the Bible contains can there be a harsher note than the way in which John greets the crowds who follow him into the wilderness to be baptised by him? He simply tells them, *‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?’*

The hostility of this tone and these words seems inescapable. Would such an approach ever be recommended in a modern pastoral manual preparing candidates for baptism?

And yet on the other hand, can there be a more tender and loving note in the Bible celebrating the abundance of God’s care and love for us than this?

14 Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!

This is the way our Old Testament passage from Zephaniah begins. It is a note of pure and unconstrained joy. And this note of joy is combined with the tenderness of God's love and the comfort of God's presence as we learn that

17 The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing

So what bridge is there between these two very different notes? How can they both together form part of the whole of God's message to us?

The first bridge comes as we remember that repentance lies at the heart of John the Baptist's message to the crowds that follow him.

Immediately after the very harsh tone of John's greeting he advises the crowds to '*Bear fruits worthy of repentance.*' They are not to trust in their ancestry or membership of a particular religious group and to think that, by itself, this ensures their right standing with God.

No, a radical work of God is at hand in which *every tree... that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.* It is not enough just to profess faith or to point to the externals of belonging to a religious group. Our whole lives need to be right with God and from that basis the fruit, or what is produced by our lives, will also be good and beneficial to others.

So, for each individual person, repentance is necessary. Repentance means a turning away from all forms of reliance upon ourselves and a turning towards, an entrusting of ourselves entirely to God's love and mercy.

But repentance is also about specific changes in our lifestyle and behaviour. If someone tells us that something is radically wrong with our lives unless they also provide us with simple and practical steps we can take to put right what is wrong then all we are left with is a paralysing general sense of guilt and condemnation.

And so the crowds ask John for some specific answers as to what repentance means for them. They ask very simply, "*What then should we do?*"

And John is equally straightforward in his replies. The practicalities of repentance are different for different people.

For the crowds as a whole there is first a simple yet challenging message of care and compassion for other people. Rather than hoarding unnecessary possessions we must be prepared to share so that others have enough. And so '*Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.*'

Sharing is a message which we seek to instil into very young children. We all consider it to be an integral part of what it means to function as a proper human being. And yet despite this how easy do any of us find it, adults or children, to share what we have with other people especially when this involves something which is very precious or dear to us?

And then individual groups within the crowd begin to seek John's advice. The tax collectors ask what they should do. The tax collectors are a despised group of people, seen as collaborators with a foreign occupying power and also as lining their own pockets through unjust and extortionate demands. Many might have written these people off thinking that there was no way in which such a group of people could produce good fruit.

But not John. His message to them is very specific and practical. He simply says *“Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.”* He is not asking them to impoverish themselves or to lose their jobs. No, they can continue in their occupations but just carry them out in a radically different and newly honest way. They simply collect the amount that is due without adding something extra on top for themselves.

Again this message is such a practical and applicable one as we consider then various scandals that afflict our public life today. Simply stick to what you are entitled to. Life is much more straightforward that way.

And then the soldiers come to him. They too are given clear and practical directions for their lives. They are not to extort money from other people by threats or false accusations and they too are simply to be satisfied with their wages. Once again repentance does not involve God taking away what is necessary for the continuation of our lives. But it does involve being prepared to forego those extras which we might want and to adopt simple standards of honesty and compassion in dealing with other people.

And the second bridge which we are invited to cross as we move from the harshness of John’s initial greeting to the joy of God recorded by Zephaniah is the ministry of Jesus Himself.

John knows that he is not the Messiah and that more is needed than simply his message of repentance even though this is an essential first step. For John’s ministry is just a preparatory one.

The ministry of Jesus who is coming after John is infinitely more powerful. As John puts it, he is not worthy to untie the thongs of Jesus’ sandals. While John’s baptism is with water, the baptism of Jesus is with the Holy Spirit and the purifying agent of fire.

And if we are to truly understand the joy which Zephaniah speaks about we need to remember that this too comes at the end of a journey. For the book of Zephaniah as a whole begins on a note which is perhaps even harsher than John's initial words in our gospel passage,

I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, says the LORD (Zephaniah 1:2)

But for Zephaniah just as for John the Baptist this is not the end of the story. There is hope in the form of a process of cleansing and repentance from human pride. And like John the Baptist he specifies sins such as idolatry and indifference towards God which need to be countered by humility and seeking God's will (*see Zephaniah 1:4,6, 2:3*).

So joy in Zephaniah is again the fruit of repentance and of God's powerful forgiveness, *The LORD has taken away the judgments against you*. In this light Zephaniah can proclaim with conviction, *The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more*.

The Advent period in the church's year can be compared to crossing a bridge. The joy and celebration of Christmas, the good news of our Saviour's birth, still lies ahead of us and indeed inspires us in our journey. But we are not there yet. We still have to travel on the bridge of repentance and faith in Jesus who is to come.

So the question for us, as it was for the crowds and the different groups within that crowd, is 'What shall we do?' It was a question to which John the Baptist gave a very specific answer, an answer which was finetuned to individuals and their needs. So what answer is God giving us? It will be different for each of us. For me much of the answer comes down to the need to trust God and God's promises and not to be tempted to look elsewhere for sources of strength. And for you?

Tristram

Masks are back

Just a reminder to everyone that under the government's Plan B covid restrictions masks are once more mandatory in churches.

Points for Prayers

- What we might do in response to God's call for repentance
- COVID plan B announced this week and its impact on the Christmas period
- Continued thanksgiving for the care, skill and courage of NHS workers and that they will not be overwhelmed by the demands on them in the winter period
- Those whom we know who are facing illnesses of all kinds and have recently been bereaved
- Bishop Ruth and the rest of the Diocesan staff as they take on additional responsibility in this vacancy in See
- For the choice of a new Bishop, someone who shares God's heart for this Diocese
- North Cadbury Church School and other local schools as they approach the end of term
- For Elliscombe House in Higher Holton now reopened and for its first residents
- Prayers and thanksgiving for contributions to the foodbanks and for those helping to take these to the foodbanks.

Hymn

A traditional Advent hymn which celebrates the excitement of Christ's coming is 'Lo, he comes with clouds descending'

Services for this Sunday and next

Sunday 12 th December	9.30 am Communion, Galhampton
Sunday 12 th December	9.30 am Communion, North Cheriton
Sunday 12 th December	9.30 am Matins, Blackford
Sunday 12 th December	11.00 am Sunday Worship, Holton
Sunday 12 th December	4.00 pm Carol Service, South Cadbury
Sunday 19 th December	9.30 am, Communion and Carols, Compton Pauncefoot
Sunday 19 th December	4.30 pm, Carol Service, Holton
Sunday 19 th December	6.00 pm, Camelot Carol Service, North Cadbury

Excalibur

Excalibur is back in paper form. It contains details of Camelot people, a record of baptisms, weddings and funerals undertaken through the church in the Camelot Parishes. The December/January edition of Excalibur has now been published online at camelotparishes.co.uk and on each parish's A Church Near You webpage.

The Parish Office

If Rob is not in the Office during normal office hours please contact him via email (office@camelotparishes.org.uk) or on 01749 850934.

Growing as a worshipper, a servant and a family

*We pray that 'we might live in love,
as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us'*

(Ephesians 5:2)