

The Sunday of the Baptist

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The Sunday of the Baptist Advent 3C: Luke 3.7-18

You offspring of vipers! Imagine being greeted by your preacher like that. People sometimes tell me about very rough street preachers they've come across in Rundle Mall; preachers who berate passers-by and hold up placards telling how hot it is in hell; preachers who openly attack the lifestyles and life choices of particular groups in our community and pronounce harsh words of judgement on them – preachers who would think of themselves as prophetic voices. People complain to me about them because as a representative of the church, to an extent, I'm held accountable for what these preachers have to say.

But prophets in the Bible preached moral standards more to people *inside* their faith community. And they told their people to look after others; insiders *and* outsiders. Eg Mal 3.5. Ez

47.22-23 So if I were listening for *Biblical* prophecy from a street preacher, I'd expect them to champion the sad, needy and lonely people in the crowd – like refugees and outcasts. Such people should be hearing that in the community of Christ, they should expect to find belonging and care; that in the community of Christ they should find people who support them in their need. Why? Because that's what God is like, and God's people try to live in God's image; to live guided by the example Jesus has given us.

But a preacher speaks differently here in church than on the street, because here, the preacher is speaking to insiders; encouraging us, as a community, to keep on being the people who embody God's love and acceptance and welcome and care to the sad, the needy, the poor, the outsider. And if we forget we're that sort of community and drift off, the preacher has

to remind us to turn back; to repent. Again and again, this is the message from the scriptures set for Advent. The lesson of today's Gospel is that everyone can start exactly where they are and turn to live a more God-centred life. God meets us where we are, begins to transform us, and leads us into a fuller life. Today this message of repentance – of a new start in life – gets fleshed out in very direct language. We just heard John the Baptist preach this repentance in three ways.

He began by warning of potential judgement and he called us insiders to *bring forth fruit worthy of repentance*. ⁽⁷⁻⁹⁾ John's preaching assumed that the people who came down to hear him were insiders; believers. John says our faith must shape what we do with our lives; it must result in our lives bearing fruit so we can nourish and strengthen the lives of people around us – both insiders and outsiders.

The second aspect of John's preaching concerned the ethics of power and responsibility. He told influential Jewish people they should live justly; not misuse their power for their own enrichment or to put others down. ⁽¹⁰⁻¹⁴⁾ He specifically addressed tax collectors and soldiers, so we can imagine the sort of people he'd speak to today; people who can influence the stability and security of needy people's lives. So John was speaking to people like us.

Finally, John told them who it is that we must turn to face: Jesus, the one who is to come, and who will baptise us with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ⁽¹⁵⁻¹⁸⁾ Can we wonder for a moment what it would feel like to turn to face Jesus?

It was people of good will who came out to receive John's baptism. They were insiders, and they were filled with expectation. But was their expectation relevant to John's message? John had called them into the wilderness. That made them remember that Moses had once led God's people into the wilderness and God had rescued them from their Egyptian

slavemasters. So were they wondering if it would be like that with John? Would God use John to free them from the Romans? For an answer, John meets them with those shocking words. *You offspring of vipers!* They came to John with the wrong questions – the wrong expectations.

Like many a good teacher, John is very tough from the word go. These people might think of themselves as the children of Moses and Abraham, but John interrupts their thought patterns to tell them that they're actually living like descendants of the serpent; the tempter of the Genesis 3 story–*You offspring of vipers!*

That temptation story – and we'll hear some of it in this afternoon's lessons and carols service – was all about presuming on God's grace; the idea that we're God's people, so whatever comes from God is simply ours for the taking.

John believes the people coming down to see him are like that – *Have you heard? There's a new religious sensation down at the river; let's go down and cash in on it;* it's an attitude of entitlement which John attacks head on.

John's style of preaching is very difficult for us to hear. He got right in your face – literally. Nowadays, if people come to *us* to ask for baptism, we smile and speak gently to them. But maybe John is a bit more realistic than we are. He warns that God requires honest repentance, transformed lives and fruitfulness.

We've got all that in our baptismal services too, and our candidates for baptism and their sponsors say they'll fulfil those requirements in the context of the church community. But so often, we seldom see them again. So do I fail to make sure they understand the seriousness of what they're promising? Should I try out John's preaching style on my next baptismal family; *You offspring of vipers!?* I doubt it'd work. But that's speculation. Is there a solid lesson for us in today's

Gospel?

Yes. There *is* a definite message today. We're God's community – not our own; God's. And God calls us to keep on bearing fruit; yielding grain for those who need it. God knows we can – believes in us. And we can; like we do for Mary Mag's, St Luke's Mission and St John's Youth Services. And it's always a team effort; none of us is exempt. We have to grow and multiply our missions because the needs are growing and multiplying. We have to turn to God and honestly face both the needs and our abundance, and decide together to respond. There is no other option.

The Advent message also reminds us that every one of those needy bears the image and likeness of our God: we meet Jesus, child of God, in each of these whom we serve. We must be ready for him, today and at any time, with fruit, grain and water to share, for we never want to see him arrive here to find a barren tree or an empty plate or cup. We could never leave any child in such need, could we. Amen