

The Sunday of the Baptist

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Advent 3C – Luke 3 7-18

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, You offspring of vipers! Imagine being greeted by your preacher like that. Sometimes you're confronted by street preachers in Rundle Mall; preachers who yell at passers-by and hold up placards telling how hot it is in hell; preachers who attack the lifestyles and life choices of particular groups in our community and pronounce harsh words of judgement on them – preachers who present themselves as prophetic voices.

But prophets in the Bible preached moral standards more for the benefit of people *inside* their faith community. They told their people to be loyal to God, and to look after others with justice and mercy; both insiders *and* outsiders. Eg Mal 3.5. Ez 47.22-23 So if I were listening for *Biblical* prophecy on the street, I'd hope it would champion sad, needy and lonely people like refugees and outcasts. You'd want these people to hear on the streets that in the community of Christ, they'll find belonging and care; that in the community of Christ they'll find people who support them in their need; God's people, trying to live according to the example of Jesus.

If we forget we're called to be that sort of community, preachers have to remind us to turn back; to repent. A major lesson in today's Gospel is that we can all start over again from exactly where we are; no matter how messy. We can turn to live a more God-centred life. God meets us where we are, ready to transform us and lead us into a fuller life. Today this message of repentance – turning back to God – gets fleshed out in very direct language. John the Baptist preached 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; or should be. 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 powerful people that they should live justly and not misuse that 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. John was speaking to people like you and me.

Finally, John told them who it is that we must turn to face in our repentance: Jesus, the one who is to come; the one 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?

The people who went out to receive John's baptism were insiders, and they seemed full of hope. But was *their* hope in tune with *John's* message? John had called them into the wilderness to remind them how Moses had once led God's people into the wilderness. Following Moses freed them from slavery, but it was a rocky road. Would John be like that? Would God use John to free them from the Romans? For an answer, John meets them with those shocking words. *You offspring of vipers!* Did they come 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 complacency to

tell them they're actually living like descendants of the serpent; the tempter of the Genesis 3 story – that's why he calls them *You offspring of vipers!* Reminding them of the temptation story warned them against presuming on God's grace; the idea that we're God's children, so whatever comes from God is simply ours for the taking. It's an attitude of entitlement which John tackles head on.

His style of preaching is very difficult for us to hear. He gets right in your face. Nowadays, if people come to *us* to ask for baptism, we smile and speak gently to them. But is John a bit more direct than we are? He warns that God requires honest repentance, transformed lives and fruitfulness. We say all that in our baptism services too, and our candidates for baptism and their sponsors say they'll fulfil all those requirements in the context of the church community. But so many are missing now? Have I failed to make sure they get 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 don't know that it'd work.

So is there a solid lesson for us in today's Gospel? Yes. There *is* a definite message today. First, we're God's community. Not our own; God's. And second, God calls us to keep on bearing fruit for those who need it. God knows we *can* – God believes in us. And we *can*; 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. But before that can happen, we have to turn to God and honestly face both those needs and our abundance, and decide *together* to respond. There *is* no other option.

Advent reminds us that everyone in need bears the image and likeness of our God. We meet Jesus, the child of God, in each of these we're called to serve. We must be ready for him to come to us, today and at any time; ready with our fruit, grain and water ready 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