

Sermon for Sunday 16th December 2018

Philippians 4: 4-7 and Luke 3: 7-18

'The Lord is near'

'That's it. Enough is enough. Your time is up. If you don't produce some flowers this year you're being dug up and going on the bonfire'.

I hope the neighbours weren't listening as I talked sternly to my Camelia. It had come with us from London when we moved house and consistently failed to flower. I had tried it in several places in the garden in case that was the problem. This was its last chance. Surprisingly – the next year it flowered for the first time and has continued to flower profusely ever since... Maybe talking to plants does work – I know I'm in good company there.

John the Baptist uses a gardening image to warn his listeners about the coming judgement– 'Produce fruit in keeping with repentance....The axe has been laid to the root of the tree and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire'

His message is a deeply uncomfortable one and delivered uncompromisingly. Calling people a bunch of treacherous snakes is not the way I would want to start a sermon! John is telling them, more likely shouting at them; repent, turn back to God because judgement is coming. And using more agricultural images he says it will be like the farmer at harvest time, gathering the wheat into the barn, beating it with the winnowing fork, separating the grain from the husks and burning the chaff on the fire. Which will you be- grain or chaff – is the implication. Will they survive the coming wrath of God?

It's a pretty terrifying picture, and yet Luke very clearly says this is good news. He says 'With many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.' Good news? How can God's impending judgment be good news? Well it depends who you are I suppose. For the point of good judgement is that if it is fair and just, right is done, justice is had. For the victim in a court case when the judge finds in their favour and the perpetrator is punished, it is very definitely good news. There is a saying that the rich pray for peace while the poor pray for justice. When you are the discriminated against, the disadvantaged,

the abused, then justice, a putting right of wrongs, is what you long for.

The Jews, the people of Israel, longed for God to act. The coming judgement of God was generally seen as a good thing because he would finally right the wrongs of years of oppression by foreign pagan powers, and reinstate his rule in their land. God would rule and all would be well again in Israel. Much of the Old Testament, the psalms, and the prophets in particular look forward to a time when the foreign rulers would be ousted and God's kingdom would be reinstated. That is what the coming messiah would do – bring in God's kingdom, right all the wrongs done against them and they would live in peace and prosperity again. Judgement is good if you are sure you are in the right.

John's warning then is all the more surprising because he is telling the crowds that they are not necessarily on God's side, that judgement will fall on them too and they may find themselves chopped down and thrown out with the rubbish. They need to get ready, to repent, to turn their lives around and be ready for what is coming. It is not enough to call themselves children of Abraham – to rely on their nationality, their race...this

is much more personal. They need to repent of what they have been doing, of the way they have been living. They need to turn back to God, acknowledge their own failings and sins and begin afresh, that's what the baptism John was offering symbolised. A new beginning, a fresh start with God, ready for the coming judgment.

It was not just the foreign oppressors who would be judged and found wanting when judgement happened, but the people of Israel too. It was a call like that of the ancient prophets, to the whole nation, to turn back to God. John's message is both political and very personal. It is about the repentance of the nation and its way of life, a collective return to God, and about the everyday actions and behaviour of the individuals. God, John warns, will be looking at the fruit of their lives. They were coming for baptism – but would their lives then proclaim the change of their hearts? Was it real and lasting?

'What should we do then' asked the crowds? How can we escape the wrath of God's judgement?

John's answer is surprisingly practical. To all he says: share what you have. If you have more than you need

give to those who have nothing. Be generous. The first sign of that turning back to God, to that putting right our relationship with God – is a putting right our relationship with other people. No more greed, no more accumulating wealth at others expense but a deep concern for the wellbeing of others.

And then he singles out two groups who were part of the establishment, part of the oppression and exploitation of the people, the tax collectors and the soldiers. Interesting that these groups are part of the crowd and that they too have come out into the wilderness to hear John's message. The tax collectors are told to stop creaming off the top and collect only what is required legally. The soldiers – probably Herod's soldiers– are told to be content with their pay and not use their position and power to exhort money from the people. Putting aside greed, the abuse of power and pursuit of self-interest will show the fruit of repentance.

And so we are told, the people were waiting expectantly ...waiting for the messiah to come, waiting hopefully for the judgement he would bring and the new kingdom that would begin. Two thousand years

later we still wait expectantly, that's what advent is all about, not waiting for the 25th December to come but waiting expectantly, hopefully for the day of God's judgement, for the coming of his kingdom and the rule of Jesus, the messiah, as king.

Do we see that as good news? For all of us who long for God to act – to put an end to the evil in the world, an end to injustice, exploitation, violence, war, the suffering of millions around the world who are poor and hungry and abused, ... then yes we wait hopefully for that day. For all those who are suffering more personally, enduring sickness, suffering, abuse, addiction, grief, then yes we wait hopefully, expectantly, longing for a time when God will wipe every tear from our eye and recreate his world, perfect and whole with no sickness, no grief, no more suffering. We long for God's justice, an end to evil in all its forms, and a putting right of all that is wrong....

But we should remember too John's warning. God will judge all of us. Not something we like to talk about much, it's an uncomfortable, maybe even a frightening thought. For will he find us wanting? Will we be grain

or chaff? Will there be a place for us in God's new, perfect world? How do we know? How can we be sure?

John calls us to repent – to turn back to God. To stop living our lives as if we were in charge, ignoring God or keeping him only for special occasions and times of great need. To put our relationship with God on a new footing. To turn to him afresh and make a new start. We do it when we first become Christians, we need to do it again and again as we continually go astray and live life our own way. That's why we turn back to God every Sunday in prayers of penitence, acknowledging our failing to live God's way and our need of his forgiveness.

But on that day – when we face judgement - can we be sure we have done enough, that we are bearing enough good fruit? The answer of course is that we can never be good enough, to do that we would have to be perfect and we are not. Thankfully we have a merciful God, who loves us so much that he gave his son to die for us, to bear the weight of our sins for us, to take our just punishment on himself. So when we look forward to that time of judgement we can do so confidently, and hugely humble and grateful for what Jesus has

done for us. Jesus ensures that we will be found worthy to be part of God's new creation, when we trust in him and turn to him in repentance.

And John calls us to show that repentance in our lives every day – in all that we do and say. Particularly in our relationships with others, near and far, in honesty and generosity and love and concern for their needs. God's promised kingdom begins here and now in us and our actions. We do not leave the poor and the sick and the oppressed to wait for that day of justice in the future – we begin it now in our lives, in the life of our church, our community, while waiting for the day it will be completed and Jesus will rule as king in his kingdom.

And because Jesus stood in our place, we can, with Christians down the centuries and around the world, with Paul and the church in Philippi, look forward to that day of judgement, with hope and joy and the peace that passes understanding in our hearts; whatever our personal circumstances; whatever the outcome of Brexit; because we are certain of what awaits us. That is good news. Judgement is coming, the Lord is near, rejoice in the Lord always, I say again, rejoice.