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Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon :
December 16, 2018 ~ “John the Baptist”

John the Baptist – Luke 3:7-18 & Philippians 4:4-7

This morning, I'd like to go back through the Gospel reading, adding a bit more context to fill it out. John the Baptist takes an important role in St Luke's Gospel. This passage tells the story of John's ministry in the wilderness, and the way he related to the people that came to him to be baptised for the forgiveness of sins. It gives us an insight into one of the ways in which God was working in the world, even before Jesus's ministry had begun.

But way before that, around the time of the births of Jesus and John, they were linked by Luke. The first chapter of his Gospel weaves their stories together - beginning with the foretelling of the births of first John and then Jesus; Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth, then expecting the birth of her son John; Mary's great song of praise and thanks, the Magnificat, and the chapter ends with the birth of John and Zechariah's great song of praise and prophecy, the Benedictus. Zechariah prophesies of John:

“You child, will be called the prophet of the Most High. For you will go before the Lord to prepare His ways.

To give knowledge of salvation to His people, by the forgiveness of their sins”.

And in our Gospel reading today, we heard how John did exactly that. He proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Radical preaching, breaking ground for the even more radical teaching of Jesus. And when they came to John in crowds he told them in no uncertain terms what they needed to do in order to achieve the forgiveness of their sins.

This is very fierce teaching – the crowds must have been very keen. They come despite the fact that the first thing they are told is that they are a crowd of poisonous snakes. That their precious inheritance as Israelites is worthless. Jews had (and have) a rightfully high opinion of their inheritance as the chosen people of God and the children of Abraham, but here they are being told that they risk being replaced by totally new people raised by God out of the stones of the earth. And John goes on to tell them that they risk being cut down – that the axe is ready to chop up any of them that do not start bearing good fruit and the pieces will be thrown into the fire.

No wonder that the people ask John what they must do to avoid this fate. John's solution is quite simple, and reminiscent of much of Jesus's own teaching. Go back home. No need to change your job, but treat people much more fairly and equitably:

- If you are rich enough to have two coats, share them with someone who has none; Likewise if you have plenty of food;
- If you are a tax collector, or another person in a position of financial authority or power, do not use that position to take more than is prescribed by the authorities, as necessary and fair.
- If you are a soldier, or other person with physical power, do not use it to extort money from people, but be satisfied with your wages.

I expect that there was a lot more, but this is enough to give a flavour of John's teaching.

There are modern equivalents of tax collectors or soldiers during the first century Roman occupation of Palestine. We still have people who use their financial or physical power in their own interests rather than for the general good. But John's teaching was addressed to everyone who came. We all need to consider our need for repentance and change, within the context of our own lives. We all need to consider ways in which we might be able to share what we have with others who have less.

John drew large crowds, his teaching was very compelling, and he led people to a real desire to change their lifestyles. It's not surprising that they wondered who he was, and questioned whether he might be the Messiah. John quickly put them right, prophesying that someone much more powerful than himself is coming, who would baptise them with fire and the Holy Spirit. John's sermon ends in characteristically robust style with a promise that his successor will treat them all like a farmer separating the good grains of wheat from the worthless chaff, which will be burnt in eternal fire. The wheat is the central grain, full of sustenance and food value. The chaff consists of the outer layers of the grain, hard, dry and flavourless – not worth storing and impossible to cook with.

I once saw wheat being threshed by hand. It was about 35 years ago, in China when it had only just emerged from the Cultural Revolution. It had nothing like its current development and economic success, and agriculture was still largely carried out manually.

To thresh wheat by hand, you need a good smooth, hard surface on which to put your grain – in this case, the public road provided a very good replacement for the traditional threshing floor. Every vehicle that came along was encouraged to drive over the unhusked grain to separate out the wheat from the chaff – traditionally this is done by oxen pulling boards over the grain, or men wielding hinged clubs. In either case one really wouldn't like to be in the place of that grain. After the separation, the wheat and chaff are thrown together into the air

(with a winnowing fork) with the heavier wheat falling straight down while the lighter chaff is blown sideways to fall separately. And the chaff can be burnt. Ouch.

John had disciples, just as Jesus did. Some of them approached Jesus later, while John was in prison, to check up that Jesus was indeed the Saviour that John had predicted. As He was, of course, but of a gentler style than John, with more emphasis on God's love and mercy than on His judgement.

Just as well, really, that our first reading was that lovely passage from St Paul's letter to the Philippians. Not all is doom and gloom. We still have much reason to rejoice and be happy. Sometimes we do need to be confronted by our sinfulness, and Advent is a good time for repentance. But it is also a season for joy in the anticipation of the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, come into the world to save us from our sins.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

FJB