**16th December 2018**

**Luke 3.7-20**

Advent was one week away, so a family thought they would see what the kids remembered from the previous year’s celebrations.

‘Who can tell me what the four candles in the advent wreath represent?’ the father asked.

His son jumped in with seven-year-old wisdom, saying ‘there’s love, joy, peace and …’

At that moment the five-year-old daughter interrupted, ‘Peace and QUIET!’

Maybe you are hoping for some peace and quiet this Christmas. I know the days leading up to Christmas are usually anything but peaceful and quiet.

Do you hope for a peaceful and quiet life?

We have been looking at the theme of peacemaking this Advent, anticipating the coming of the Prince of Peace. We have been considering how to be peacemakers. Last week we looked at the proclamation of John the Baptists to prepare the way of the Lord and we thought about how we prepare for peace, how we need a change of heart and mind, repentance means a change of direction. We thought about thinking big – hoping for peace and not just a jar of mint jelly.

This weeks’ bible text is a continuation of the ministry of John the Baptist – the fore runner of Jesus, who came to prepare people for his arrival. People came out to him in the wilderness to hear his message and be baptized them as a sign of their willingness to change.

What does he say to them?

*‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our father.” For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. 9The axe has been laid to the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.’*

Why ‘vipers’? (A bit harsh, John.) Vipers are venomous and, if surprised by a threat, will strike out. If looking for dinner, they will use surprise and strike, paralyse, then eat. It is a vivid and unpleasant image of pure selfishness, pure self-preservation – and it turns our stomach.

 ‘Who warned you to come?’ he shouts, seeing their religious life as self-preservation rather than devotion.

Most fiercely, he challenges the puffed-up self-image that is made of nothing but nostalgia: ‘Don't tell me who your ancestors were. WHO THE HELL ARE YOU?’

A prophet challenges a nostalgic nation? Well, in this week of more political turmoil what possible relevance could this scripture have? I promised my son I wouldn’t mention Brexit – so I will leave you to make the connections.

But suddenly, after fierce, challenging language he changes tone the moment people ask him ‘What shall we do?’, and his answers are disarmingly simple. *Share if you have more than enough. Tax collectors, take only your due. Soldiers, don't bully.* Very simple.

What is truly shocking is that hoarding when others are cold and hungry is normalised. Taking more than your due is normalised. Bullying is normalised.

Roman soldiers were known to extort money and make false allegations. Theft and extortion still exist, but perhaps a greater and more pervasive threat – particularly in terms of false allegations – is the anonymity that the internet affords us, enticing some people to behave in ways that they would not if they could be identified. Cyberbullying is insidious in its nature and ever present, with young people particularly susceptible. Research has linked soaring levels of mental health problems to unhealthy social media use. Do we need to reconsider our own online behaviour in any respects? What can we do to protect and support the young and vulnerable in making good choices online?

In the ancient world, possessing two coats indicated immense wealth. Having excess food was also a luxury, though John does not instruct his hearers to share from plenty, but simply to share what they have. His instructions cover all people, whatever their means. But in our consumerist and competitive society it is hard wired into us to accumulate more and more and have the latest and we fear being left out or left behind by our peers.

Inequality in society and the vast differences in wealth in a society lead to a society not at peace with itself and its neighbours. If you want a more peaceful society you have to address that issue.

Marys’ Magnificat, which we will look at next week, speaks about how the Lord:

has brought down rulers from their thrones
    but has lifted up the humble.
53He has filled the hungry with good things
    but has sent the rich away empty.

Clare shared at the elders meeting on Thursday how General Pinochet, the Chilean dictator, banned the reading of this scripture – because he knew its subversive threat. He got it – he got what the way of Jesus was about – we just let these verses float over us.

Share if you have more than enough. Tax collectors, take only your due. Soldiers, don't bully

Shouldn't these three suggestions of John be obvious? They're not a high standard. They should be the normal base line. But selfishness is normalized. That is the terrible place our world is in and why John speaks out.

The second thing that is very striking is that he doesn't distinguish between those who might think themselves ordinary and those who have deeply distasteful jobs such as tax collecting or being an agent of oppression as the Roman soldiers were. They, too, have something very simple to be done, something perfectly manageable that will make a difference to others’ lives.

In Luke’s Gospel, John instructs his followers in a series of ‘doable’ actions, related to their circumstances and occupations. Essentially, his instruction is: ‘*Do what you need to do and do it well – with honour and integrity and compassion.’*

This is a teaching that pagans, Jews and Christians would all acknowledge as inherently worthwhile, and is akin to the universally recognised ‘Golden Rule’: do to others as you would have them do to you.

What does a Christian perspective add to this universal rule? Do we treat others with moral integrity simply because we want to be treated well in return? Or does Christian teaching give us a different purpose to our moral framework? I would suggest we seek to do the right thing not because of what we will get out of it but because it is the right thing to do regardless of the cost. And we ae called like Jesus to be prepared to be persecuted and even to suffer for doing what is right. There is often a cost for being a peacemaker.

If our discipleship means anything to us. If our baptism means anything to us – we are committed to walking the way of Jesus. What would Jesus do? It is a simplistic yet profound question and challenge to all our lives.

Of course Jesus told us to love our enemies and tackled evil not by returning evil with evil but with love.

This year saw the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King. He described himself as the drum major for peace and won the Nobel Peace Prize for his work for civil rights. He was a follower of Jesus Christ. He famously said

*Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that. Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend.*

He also said ‘*without justice there can be no peace. He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it.’*

Which is why Christian Aid are questioning the selling of arms to Saudi Arabia when they are behind the terrible conflict in Yemen where *14 million people are on the brink of famine*. *The UK is directly complicit: arms sales from this country to Saudi Arabia have increased by two thirds since 2016 and now account for nearly half of Britain’s major arms exports.*

Rowan Williams, Christian Aid’s chair and the former Archbishop of Canterbury, said:

*“We can’t pretend that British involvement in war is a thing of the past.  We may not have experienced the direct effects of war in this country for a lifetime, and we can be thankful for that; but our overseas policies are still helping to support violence and injustice elsewhere in the world, among those least able to defend themselves.*

*Is the UK prepared to take a new lead in peacemaking by promoting and championing human rights and international law in settings of extreme and indiscriminate violence?*

Martin Luther King, apart from being a follower of Jesus was also inspired by Ghandi, who himself followed the teaching of Jesus. Ghandi said ‘*peace is not only the absence of violence, it is the presence of justice’*.

Justice involves doing something to make things right. Acting for peace. Addressing the injustice, the hurt that has led to discord and hatred and envy.

John gives mundane daily advice on behaviour. It is as if Luke, through John, wants to underline the importance of consistency and detail. We might like to think that our lives are directed by big decisions and grand gestures, but the reality is that our character is set by a million small daily choices. Don’t make the grand gesture, rather share your extra coat, and act justly and fairly in your job. Holiness dwells in the detail of these doable actions.

The third shock is that the tax collector collaborators and even soldiers, agents of brutal occupation, are there at all, and ask the moving question: ‘What shall we do?’ God is at work in their hearts by the Holy Spirit.

John recognizes the spiritual dynamic at work and the power of the spirit and the one who will come baptizing others in that Spirit. Rabbinic teaching said that a disciple should carry his master’s sandals, but only a slave should untie them. Luke’s John the Baptist is therefore declaring himself unworthy even to be the slave, let alone disciple, of the Messiah. Do we forget the awesome majesty of God incarnate? Are we really prepared for the one who is to come? Jesus, through the work of the Holy Spirit can bring awesome change in people’s lives, in peoples’ hearts. We must have hope. We must dedicate ourselves to prayer.

Paul does this in his letter to the Philippians. Like the passage of John the Baptist, there are also soldiers present in this passage. There are two soldiers in Philippians. Paul writes deeply encouragingly about what kind of bearing believers in Christ will show if they trust he rose again for them, for Jew and Gentile and all the world. He describes a kind of disciplined joy, a resilient habit of thanksgiving, a constant turning to God candid about our need and ‘gentleness,’ a refusal to meet insult with insult (4.4-6).

But far from naive, he writes from prison, with a soldier (notionally at least) at his door. He knows he probably won't see his friends again. ‘Rejoice’ also has overtones of ‘farewell’. Rome wants him isolated and frightened of their brute force. Against the odds, Paul is offering an antidote to victimhood. He insists on prayer, a defiance of the limits of worldly imagination; supplication or petition, a defiance of military machismo; thanksgiving, in defiance of scarcity and jealousy.

Most of us are not in mortal danger for our faith but, if we are gloomy about the social and political world that we have evolved, we may be deeply challenged by such spirituality and have to search our hearts to declare our vulnerability to God, and dig deep to find things defiantly to give thanks for. But prayer is that act of defiance to the world. In a materialistic world we believe in Spirit, and the power of God’s Spirit to bring change and hope.

The second soldier in Philippians is God ‘guard[ing] your hearts’ (4.7). How gloriously funny is that, when the soldier at the door thinks he is the guard who matters?

As we feel the soldier motif working on our hearts through each reading, suddenly there's a shock again hearing the soldiers of Jesus’ day ask: ‘What shall we do?’ The gospel is for them too. So, Paul and John compel us to consider what wrong assumptions have been normalized, and who is trying to normalize limits on our imagination. Then they beg of us ‘who are we and what can we do?’ when all is chaos around us.

Imagine if we all carried out our work with the question ‘How can my conduct make this role a benefit to others?’ How can I be a peacemaker? Whatever your job or calling, what do you think would John's simple suggestion be to you?

*Inspired by David Warbrick Vicar of All Saints Kings Heath in Birmingham.*

<https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2018/98-november-december-2018-bc/advent-3/postscript>