

Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3.1-12

Well life can be a bit of a lottery. Are you born into wealth or poverty? Are you in the have's or the have not's?

A constant theme in the Christmas message is God's concern for the have not's. The poor of this world: the lottery of life losers. Mary sings that God lifts up the humble and fills the hungry with good things but sends the rich away empty. It's an alarming prospect that would send many a newspaper owner phoning their editors to make sure they do a hatchet job on such a manifesto.

Our gospel passage has John the Baptist appearing without announcement or apology, proclaiming, "Repent..." (3.1-2).

I always think that the Christmas story can dissolve into sentimental mush – baby Jesus, oxen lowing, angels and shepherds without the disconcerting presence of John the Baptist in his unkempt appearance and uncompromising message. Ernest Hemingway called sentimentality "an emotion you don't have to pay for."

John's message is costly. It's hard not to regard John as a ranter, -A speaker at a workshop for ministers said: if we haven't preached the six sermons which would get us fired, we haven't been doing our jobs! I've a feeling that John was "doing his job"!

He tells people to repent – to change their ways and direction and thinking. He calls the religious types a brood of vipers. Can you imagine religious leaders speaking to one another that way today, in our society? John the Baptist is definitely in the Trump mould. He doesn't do politeness.

John warns the Pharisees and the Sadducees not to think they're safe because they're in the right group or because of "who they are" – descendants of Abraham. If God wanted to, God could raise up children of Abraham from these stones, just like that – *snap!* God is really powerful. But – what you do, matters. There will be accountability. Even now, he says, the axe is lying at the root of the tree; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Even now, he says. Even now, repent. Someone is coming. Get ready.

As I said, John is a bit of a ranter – but sometimes that is necessary to warn people and make people sit up and listen.

Should the Church rant and protest? We are after all proclaiming Jesus as the Prince of Peace. Should not the church and our message be conciliatory. Are we not called to be peace makers?

Compared to this reading from the Gospel of Matthew, our first reading, from the prophet Isaiah, presents a different vision. The lion and the lamb provide one of the most beautiful and comforting images in the Bible. It is a symbol rich in meaning that no one has to explain to us. Deep in our hearts, we already long for such peace and gentleness in the world that surrounds us.

What sort of animal are you? In times of conflict, the United States Congress often divides between the 'hawks' who want war and the 'doves' who want peace. It is possible Isaiah's poetic language of lions and lambs and little children is referring to different sorts of people who find it very hard to connect with each other? How can 'lions' and 'lambs' make peace?

We aren't sure whether the text dates from the time of the threat from the Assyrians (8th c. BCE) or from the Babylonians (6th c. BCE), but in any case, the political situation of the people of Israel is in total disarray. Into this setting, however, just when things appear hopeless and the future looks very bleak, the prophet promises that God will send a leader who will rule with justice toward all, and with mercy toward the most vulnerable in society. The little ones, the defenceless ones, the innocent ones will be protected and cared for. Isaiah urges the people to remember who they are as the people of God, reminding them that their power, their life, comes from goodness, not from greed.

In evocative poetry, Isaiah announces a new and better type of king (v.1), who will come from the 'stock of Jesse'.

Jesse was the father of King David and therefore an ancestor of Jesus. David's line had quickly become mired in scandal and drifted away from faith. The family tree that was once strong seemed to have died, but trees are hard to kill and new life can grow from the stump. The better king described here has the Spirit of God resting on him, bringing wisdom, insight, the ability to give and receive good advice, strength, knowledge, respect of God and delight in awe of God. (The prayer for this seven-fold spirit forms part of confirmation and ordination services in many churches.)

The new king does not decide by his senses (v.3b) because it is too easy for counsellors to manipulate what information a ruler receives. This king will see through all that and give equal justice to the needy. This will lead to a universal peace in which those creatures who are normally natural enemies can coexist peacefully (vv.6-8).

This 'root' king will be like an ensign (the type of flag soldiers rallied around in battle), gathering in people of other nations. Another potential cause of conflict is turned into co-existence through him.

The promises are astounding and perhaps even unbelievable: "the order of nature" that we all learned about in science class, the violence of predators that we came to accept as natural, will be overturned. The rules of life will be changed, bent in the direction of gentleness and peace, not just any peace, but *shalom*.

"*Shalom*," Walter Brueggemann says, "is creation time, when all God's creation eases up on hostility and destruction and finds another way of relating" (*Peace*). Things are going to go back to the way they were originally created, the way things were meant to be. "This poem is about the impossible possibility of the new creation!" We are told, he says, that "the old practice of the big ones eating the little ones is not the wave of the future....The rightly governed world will indeed be detoxified, no more a threat to the poor, the meek, the children, the lamb, the kid. The new world will indeed be safe for the vulnerable" (*Isaiah 1-39, Westminster Bible Companion*).

For Isaiah's people, our ancestors in faith, this hope rested in a ruler who will be a surprise, "a shoot from the stump of Jesse." *God has not forgotten you*. In this worst of situations, there will be an amazing turn of events: there is one who is to come, a great ruler who will have the Spirit of the Lord upon him, just like David did. He won't rely on hearsay or appearances but he will have such a powerful spirit of wisdom and understanding that he will judge and rule in a way that all of creation will be transformed. That's how we got to that part about the lion and the lamb. Someone is coming, says Isaiah. Justice is coming. Deliverance is coming. Peace is coming. Hold on, he says, hold on to the dream of peace.

Go back to the way Matthew refers to John at the beginning of this. He quotes Isaiah, but a different part of Isaiah, from Chapter 40, which begins, "'Comfort, O comfort my people,' says your God. 'Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins,'" and it continues with the line that Matthew quotes: "A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'"

John is described as the one who brings good news, who calls us to prepare the way of the Lord. Someone is coming, he says, and what you do matters. Get rid of everything

that's blocking the way of the One who is to come. Get rid of greed and selfishness, of hostility and resentment, of doubt and despair. Reshape your lives and the life of your people so that the poor and those pushed to the margins are brought back into the life of the community. Strive for peace by working for justice. There is no peace without justice. *What you do, matters.* There *will* be an accounting.

John is recalling for the people the dream of peace that Isaiah promised, including the promise of One upon whom the Spirit of the Lord rests, Jesus, who will indeed judge in righteousness and wisdom, Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

What the world needs is peace. Ponder these words from a young woman *Etty Hillesum* who lost her life at Auschwitz Nazi Concentration Camp: "*Ultimately, we have just one moral duty: to reclaim large areas of peace in ourselves, more and more peace, and to reflect it towards others. And the more peace there is in us, the more peace there will also be in our troubled world.*"^{vi}

Jesus came to bring peace on earth – that was the song of the angels. He came to bring us peace with God and peace with each other. John says Jesus will baptise us in the Holy Spirit – as we open our lives to the heart of God we receive his Spirit – transformation takes place. But it will need repentance on our part first of all.

Frederick Buechner defines repentance this way. "To repent is to come to your senses. It is not so much something you do as something that happens. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, 'I'm sorry,' than to the future and saying 'Wow!'" It seems to me that John the Baptist is looking at the future, expecting the "more powerful one, the one who can baptise with the Holy Spirit," and saying "WOW."

Someone described God's love and mercy and peace like the sun trying to shine through to us to light our way, cheer us and give us life. But we are sinful and Sin is like mud on a window. The mud keeps the sun from shining through the window. The mud stops the rays from reaching us. It doesn't stop God from trying to shine on us but it stops us from being able to receive the light of the world. With the tears of repentance we ask forgiveness and the mud is washed away. So the reason repenting is so important is because without it we have obstacles between us and God's grace.

Can we radically re-orient our lives, clear a path, *prepare the way* of the Lord? Can we re-shape our lives and the life of this community, and can we reach out to the world

beyond these walls, beyond our city, even beyond our nation, and speak, and live, words of peace?

As we are anointed by the Spirit, the Spirit may take us to judge in righteousness, to speak out, to protest. The Spirit may also stir us and make us uncomfortable with our life and our relationships with others.

Jesus said the Spirit is our comforter, but the Spirit can also make life uncomfortable. If you have a relationship with Jesus through his Spirit, you are going to get nudges and pokes and pricks of conscience. This relationship is not right. Your attitude needs to change. You need to do something about your anger, your unforgiveness, your bitterness, your resentment – these attitudes are not in line with the way of righteousness, the way of peaceful living. Repent – change direction – prepare the way.

In the playground of life, you know the unwritten rules. The first is that you play with your friends. Church is not meant to be that way. Jesus gave a hint of it when he talked about not just inviting your friends to your parties. The world does that. You can have a room full of like-minded people having fun together in any old club in the world. But life in God's kingdom should be different.

In the playground we have the wonderful sanction that if things don't work out as we want, we can always take our ball home. And in church if we are upset then we can stop giving financially or in time or threaten some other sanction. Good job God doesn't deal with us like that. If God withdrew his favour from us the second we ceased to please him, we would find our very next breath could be our last.

In the playground there is little forgiveness. You can lose your status as best friend by offering sweets to the 'wrong person'. But church should be different.

It is not a surprise to God that Christians have such a hard time getting along with one another because we naturally belong to the playground but we are repenting of those attitudes so we can follow the Prince of Peace and the Comforter, the Holy Spirit is at work to lead us into a peace that the world cannot give – but ironically may cause us not to be at peace until we are at peace.

Rob Parsonsⁱⁱ tells the story of an elderly woman who lived alone and every night, as darkness falls, she put a light on in the attic. Her son left home twenty-five years and became estranged from her, but she has never given up the hope that one day he will come home. The attic was his bedroom. The light stays on as a sign of welcome. , She was a Christian and the Spirit had been working in her heart– bringing self-reflection and honesty. She felt convicted that as a mother she had been too critical of him and his lifestyle and not reassuring him that she would always love him whatever he became or got up to. She managed to find his address through a friend and she sent him a Christmas card and she found the courage to express her heart to him. Something that through pride and parental distance she had never done before. She even used the word ‘sorry’ – a word that often acts like the hinge to the door of forgiveness and reconciliation.

He replied and sent a simple card back that didn’t contain any message but just greetings. She thought it was a start.

Then one day he turned up outside the house and saw the light on. The sign of waiting and of welcome. A sign of hope for a new start. So, he knocked on the door and they sat together for the first time in 25 years.

Jesus is the Prince of Peace and will be at work in our lives if we repent and are open to the Spirit’s work in ours.

For we ourselves are messengers, too, prophets, even, in the way we live our lives – in peace, in justice, in caring for the one another and for God's good creation. Are we open to be anointed by the Spirit? To be filled by the Spirit of Christ, carrying on his work. Prepare the way for the One who is to come.

ⁱ *Etty Hillesum: An Interrupted Life and Letters from Westerbork*)

ⁱⁱ Rob Parsons, *Bringing Home the Prodigals*, Hodder, 2003