

Living Justly

Readings: Phil 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

Today is the third Sunday in Advent and as you know Advent is the time when we remember the first coming of Jesus, the first Christmas, and look forward to his second coming, his return.

But our lectionary readings this morning don't seem to have much to do with Christmas. The gospel reading is about John the Baptist and I don't remember him in any nativity play I've ever seen. He doesn't feature with Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, wise men, the angels, even the innkeeper, and of course the baby Jesus. So, what is going on?

Before we look at today's readings I want to read you a poem. It's called *Christmas is really for the children* and its message is similar to that of the poem Susan read us last week.

Christmas is really for the children

Christmas is really
for the children.
Especially for children
who like animals, stables,
stars and babies wrapped
in swaddling clothes.
Then there are wise men,
kings in fine robes,
humble shepherds and a
hint of rich perfume.

Easter is not really
for the children
unless accompanied by
a cream filled egg.
It has whips, blood, nails,
a spear and allegations
of body snatching.
It involves politics, God
and the sins of the world.
It is not good for people
of a nervous disposition.
They would do better to
think on rabbits, chickens
and the first snowdrop
of spring.

Or they'd do better to
wait for a re-run of
Christmas without asking
too many questions about
what Jesus did when he grew up
or whether there's any connection.

It's too easy, isn't it, to get caught up in the warm fuzzies of Christmas, even when we move beyond the tinsel, the food and the presents, and remember Mary and Joseph, the angels, shepherds, wise men and Jesus lying in a manger, it's easy to forget to ask what was the point of it all? What was God doing? Why, in the 'fullness of time,' did God send forth his Son? (Gal 4:4) If you read on in the verse in Galatians 4:4 Paul tells us that it was all part of God's plan to redeem us and adopt us into his family, but I want to look back to our gospel reading for today to see what that has to tell us about what implications that has for us.

Luke 3:7-18

In v3 we read that John had been travelling around the countryside in the area of the River Jordan preaching and baptizing people. Let's try to imagine the scene down by the River Jordan. There would have been crowds of people all trying to get a glimpse of John, trying to hear what he was saying. Maybe they were feeling the oppressive heat down in the Jordan valley, with the rocky wilderness on either side. In a way, the scene mirrors what was going on in Israel at the time. The Jewish people were feeling hemmed in. The age of the great patriarchs, and prophets was long gone and now they had to put up with pagan occupying forces, a corrupt king and hypocritical religious leaders – all of which, incidentally, are named by Luke at the beginning of this chapter. But, some of the people, at least were looking for better things. They were pinning their hopes on God sending them a new leader, a Messiah, with Elijah as the forerunner who would prepare the way. Several false messiahs had appeared in the past but some people had still not given up hope, and so they had made the journey from Jerusalem down to the Jordan to see if, at last, this was the one.

When they got there they found that John was offering a 'baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.'" What did they understand by that? What does it mean for us? Well, if we remember that repentance is not so much about being sorry as about a change of mind, a change of direction, and that in the OT it is usually associated with a turning back to God, then probably what John is offering the crowd is an opportunity to make a fresh commitment to follow

God. John would then baptize those who wanted to make that commitment. What we are being offered today is a fresh opportunity to commit ourselves to follow God as we prepare ourselves for Christmas.

But John is quite clear that just going through a ritual is not enough. He is quite harsh and uncompromising, certainly not the sort of person you would invite to speak at a seeker-sensitive service!

“You brood of snakes,” he calls them. Now, as you know snakes don’t have a particularly good press; they rank alongside politicians, used-car salesmen and emails telling you that you have just won \$1million, not to mention OT echoes of a serpent.

“Who warned you to flee the wrath to come?” he says. Maybe he has in mind snakes trying to escape a grass or forest fire. Wrath is often associated in the Bible with fire as it is in v17 which talks of burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire. John is challenging them, not offering comforting platitudes.

What are you doing here? Why have you come? He asks them. Is it just curiosity or are you serious?

John tells them straight that just being a Jew, a descendant of Abraham isn’t enough. Maybe he would say to us that being a life-long Anglican or a regular church goer isn’t enough. It’s good, but it isn’t enough. John tells us that what he is looking for is a turning back to God, a change in attitude, in our way of thinking, and that, John says, should be seen in the way that we live. John uses a metaphor that is used quite often in the Bible – the picture of a tree. You should be bearing good fruit, says John, because if not the axe is ready to cut down any tree that does not bear good fruit and it will be thrown into the fire.

Powerful preaching and very effective. “What should we do?” asks the crowd. John answers but sometimes, I think, we are so familiar with his reply that we don’t really hear it. He doesn’t tell them to pray more, or go to the synagogue more regularly, instead he hits at their pockets. “If you’ve got two tunics, give one to someone who doesn’t have one. If you’ve got plenty of food, give some to those in need.” Maybe now, at last, we see some connection with Christmas. Christmas is often associated with giving, part of the so-called Christmas spirit. There are ads on the TV encouraging us to give to food banks, and groups like the Sallies make up food parcels for those in need. As a church we are involved in the Shoe box appeal and we organize a Christmas Day lunch. And it’s not

only Christians, businesses like K Mart and the Nelson Mail collect toys and presents, and what about the Bikers' Christmas Toy Run, I think that would get a thumbs up from John the Baptist.

Luke also mentions two other groups of people who seem to have taken John's message to heart. They are two of the most unpopular groups of the time: the tax collectors and the soldiers. To the tax collectors he says, "only collect what is required." Often, of course they demanded more and kept the extra for themselves, remember Zacchaeus. What would be the equivalent today? Maybe ensuring fair business practices; not looking for excessive profits; bosses not paying themselves over-the-top salaries whilst exploiting their workers. I think John would have quite a lot to say to those whose greed precipitated the financial crisis of a few years back.

What about the soldiers? Probably these were more like peace keepers than frontline troops and John's message to them is – don't abuse your power, don't extort money by force – literally don't 'violently shake' anyone, don't give them the once over. And don't make false accusations. Anyone who has felt helpless in the face of 'the big guys' can identify with what John is describing here.

But again we may be asking – what has all this got to do with Christmas, with the coming of Jesus? The crowd too are muttering among themselves and asking: "Is this the Messiah?" John, of course, is quick to deny this, and to point to someone more powerful who will come after him and will baptize the people not with water but with the Holy Spirit and with fire. We, of course, know the end of the story and we know that he is talking about Jesus. And soon after this the crowd will have the opportunity to know this too as Jesus begins his own preaching and healing ministry.

Do you remember the poem I read at the beginning: *Christmas is really for the children*? It challenged us to think about what happened when Jesus, the baby in the manger, grew up. When we read the gospels they tell us about what Jesus did and said in his lifetime, and how he challenged the attitudes of society he lived in. This is how Ruth Page describes it in her book *God and the Web of Creation*:

"No one could be compelled into the relationship and actions Jesus called the kingdom of God if they did not catch the vision, if they did not respond out of their own freedom with some trust and love, however faltering. ... Jesus' own actions showed remarkable freedom, ... freedom from all the other barriers society put up ... He went among the poor, he stayed with a tax gatherer, he cured a Roman soldier's daughter, he dined with a wealthy Pharisee and encouraged Nicodemus, a 'leader of the Jews,' into a rebirth of vision. ... His

good news was for all people, of all kinds, and it was in their service that Jesus used his freedom so that the love of God and the love of neighbour coalesced.”

Ruth Page also talks about ethics or living justly as our theme for today puts it, as “concurrence with what God wants;” concurrence not only in the sense of in agreement with but also in its literal sense of running along beside. It reminds me of that verse in Micah, Micah 6:8: “What does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

Joel Green in his commentary on Luke puts it this way:
“John’s ethical message contains within it a social critique the profundity of which is appreciated only when it is recognized that it not only points the finger of judgment at large-scale injustice but in fact reaches into the realities of day-to-day existence.” In other words John was talking about everyday stuff – how we look after the less fortunate members of our society, how we handle power and influence.

I think that today John would challenge us to think globally and act locally; to be concerned about social justice within our own community, within NZ and elsewhere on our planet. More and more we are becoming aware that what happens locally can have massive impacts elsewhere – the current talks on global climate change tell us that. Sometimes we can feel a bit powerless but nevertheless we can sign petitions, we can write to our MPs, we can go on marches and attend meetings as John and I did a few weeks ago at the climate change march in Nelson, but at the everyday level, what are we doing in our own households?

Are we concerned enough about the effects of sea level rises on some of our Pacific neighbours that we are prepared to make changes in the way we live. It’s a challenge, but I think confronting these issues is part of what it means to live justly.

Then again, many of us are not in positions of power in the way that the tax collectors and soldiers of John’s day were but most of us, though not all be any means, are in the position of having today’s equivalent of two tunics or an abundance of food. I’m not trying to make you feel guilty here just saying that we, and I include myself here, need to have an attitude that is mindful of others. You have probably heard the saying ‘bloom where you’re planted’ and I guess what I’m saying is ‘live justly where you’re planted.’ That’s why one of the reflection questions is: “What would living justly look like for you personally?”

It need not be anything major. A lot of what John the Baptist had to say was about sharing and that can be something quite simple such as cooking a meal for someone, taking them some flowers or veggies from the garden, putting a can of

baked beans in the food bank. In one church John and I were in there was a couple who had won prizes for ballroom dancing and for a couple of terms they offered free lessons for anyone who wanted to learn – they had a good uptake too as lessons can be quite expensive. So sharing our talents, whatever they are, is important as well!

We seem to have got quite a long way away from our readings and from thinking about Christmas. But what I have tried to say this morning is that Christmas was just the beginning. Jesus grew up and when he did he showed us what it means to live God's way. And John the Baptist challenged the people of his day, the crowd of ordinary people, people of power and influence as well as the religious leaders. He was calling them back to a renewed commitment to living not with an eye to our own personal gain but with an attitude that looks out for, cares for and shares with those in need. Let's think how we can follow Christ's example to serve one another, to seek out and care for 'the last, the least and the lost' as he did. Our society tends to have a go at doing this at Christmas, but I think we, as Christian people, are being challenged to see what we can do to live a Christmas lifestyle all year round, "to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God." Amen.