

Advent 2 (yrC) – Luke 3:1-18

You bunch of snakes. Why are you here this morning? Who told you to come here? What do you think you gain by being here? Any of those gravestones outside – God could turn them into people and put them on the pews instead....

That got your attention, didn't it?! I imagine it did the same for John's hearers too. 'You brood of vipers!' As introductions to a sermon goes, John the Baptist's approach is not the most..., well, put it this way, I've never heard it recommended at any of the preaching and communication courses I've ever been to. Draw people in, we're told. Use a nice joke or anecdote. Smile. Calling your listeners by the name of the most devious and disliked animal you can think of is not top of our list of how to win friends and influence people.

After all, it's not as if this was a low cost trip that people had taken to go and see John. Most of us here this morning have probably only had a few minutes' journey to get here. Actually let's test that – door to door, how many took 5 / 10/ 15 etc. Now let's think about this crazy character that Luke introduces us to here. John wasn't just in the local synagogue up the road, he was out in the Judean desert, miles from anywhere. I imagine the minimum journey time was several hours hard walking through rocky paths and sand to get there, and for many it might have been several days' journey. This was something big – word was spreading, God was on the move, and imagine you're a keen Jew, you think to yourself, this is worth going to see. I'll pay the cost – the days off work, the hard walking.... and you make your preparations, you say goodbye to your family, you head off into the desert and you finally get to see this strange figure that everyone's talking about and what does he say? 'You snake, why are you here?'

It's pretty odd isn't it? What on earth is going on here? And what is Luke trying to tell his readers? I think if you want a one-phrase summary of today's reading, it would be this: **be careful what you wish for** (REPEAT). What do I mean by that? Well, there's a growing sense of expectation in the air. God seems to be about to do something big. And every Jew had been waiting centuries for this, you can imagine the building excitement. And yet, and yet.... Luke is also giving us some pretty big clues that this Messiah *wasn't going to be the one everyone wanted*. This Messiah was going to challenge the social order, he was going to divide the nation by rejecting violence and political ambition and he was going to invite the whole world into his plans. Jewish people, you want a Messiah, do you? Be careful what you wish for (REPEAT).

In many ways, John himself embodies some of this counter-cultural challenge to his own people. John is the archetypal crazy holy man, isn't he? Living in the desert, dressing in camel's hair, living off locusts and wild honey. Holiness is dangerous isn't it? I'm not suggesting that it requires eccentricity, as if somehow being a bit odd is a qualification for sainthood – but I'm sure many of us have met some very holy people over the years, and they have this sort of thing about them, don't they? Something that disturbs us, makes us a bit uncomfortable in their presence, but is somehow strangely compelling. We want to be around them, even though every time we are, we get that little frisson of nerves about what they might say or do next.

John the Baptist was one of those, but for all his eccentricity, his message rings loud and clear to us today, just as it did to those first Jewish hearers. You want to know God, he says, you want to follow the Messiah? Be careful what you wish for, because here's what you need to do. The first thing is this, **lay down the crowns**. Or as John says: READ v8b. Just because your ancestry has been uniquely privileged by God is no guarantee of what he's doing now.

You see here were all these devout Jews – and they probably were devout, given what they were sacrificing to come out into the desert. And they were seeking baptism, which in itself was a hugely significant thing. (Very different context to today's baptism.) At this time, usually it was only Gentiles who got baptised in order to enter the Jewish faith – here, it was Jews themselves, accepting, if you like, the humiliation of receiving baptism like a Gentile. That was enough, surely? These guys were the early adopters, the people on the frontier of what God was doing – right?

Apparently not. Listen, John says, all these *outward* qualifications, your perceived status as God's people – it doesn't help you. You wear your heritage from Abraham as a badge of honour, but this new thing that God is doing is bigger than that. You've got to lay down the crowns, the qualifications, the sense of entitlement. God is doing a new thing: he can even make the stones into God's people if he wanted to.

It's a tough message isn't it, but it's one we can't shy away from today, too. Are we trading on a sense of entitlement? Being born into a so-called Christian country, having Christian parents, going to a church school or a youth group. That's all good, and like the Jewish people of Jesus' day, it definitely gives you a headstart. But it's no substitute for obedience to God. Repentance is not about claiming your birthright, but submitting yourself entirely to God.

I think the application goes further, too. Just like the melting pot of first century Galilee, our society and indeed our churches today, at this moment, face a similar sense of uncertainty and profound social change. It's a desert time for us too. What will the future look like for us?

Perhaps sat here today, it might feel like the church is pretty much how it has always been, but I can more or less guarantee that if I live to retirement age, the church in this country will look radically different to what it does now. We might have Cranmer and Wesley and other great spiritual leaders as our fathers, but that's no guarantee of our future success.

To use the language of verse 9, the axe is at the root of the church in this country, possibly more than it has been for generations. Whole denominations are on the verge of closure, and whole new ones are starting in their place. The old privileges of vast wealth and protection from a benevolent state have gone; the only path from here is towards a more radical discipleship, a discipleship that will feel like a journey out into the desert. **But it is in the desert that God brings a new thing to birth.** (REPEAT) That was true for Israel in the Exodus, it was true for John here, it was true for Jesus too with his temptation in the next chapter. The desert is God's way of bringing new things to birth. Are we heading out to see it?

Maybe God's renewal is not the one we want. Maybe it will be far costlier, far more radical, turning our assumptions upside down. Maybe God is going to break up his church, to send it underground, to shut down most of these glorious buildings and put groups of Christians in homes and cafes and workplaces and shopping centres. Maybe some of us will have to bite the bullet and go to prison for refusing to compromise on who Jesus is and what he did for us. Maybe new monastic communities will form, as groups of Christians return to early church models of pooling resources. Maybe jobs like mine won't exist, and we'll all have to live by faith or hold down part-time jobs to pastor churches.

It might be none of those things, or some of them, or all of them. But one thing's for sure: for us, just as for John's would be disciples, the only path out of the desert is a radical obedience to God, a radical discipleship. A repentance, a change, a new thing that bears real fruit, the fruit of transformed lives. People who lay down their crowns, are prepared to do whatever it takes to see God glorified in this nation.

But if we have to lay down these crowns, if that's not the way, then what is the way instead? John the Baptist has two more vital things to tell us. I've used up most of my time, so much more briefly, but perhaps more personally: firstly, we have to **walk the talk**. That's his pretty blunt message isn't it? READ v7-8. Walk the talk. John says, it's all very well coming out all this way to see me, but it doesn't matter how religious you are, what matters most to God is obedience. Repentance *means* something. It starts with saying sorry but ultimately, it means much more than that. It means change your life, live out your beliefs. For John's listeners, the application was very clear. They already had God's law, they knew what a just and loving lifestyle was like, they needed reminding to live it out. So John gives them 3 very specific examples: READ v10-14.

It's not rocket science, is it! Obedience is usually easy to understand but hard to do. A lifestyle characterised by generosity, honesty and refusing to abuse any power which we have. And note the overtones of social justice here – it's not just generosity to our peers, people like us, but to those who really need it. And the thought that has haunted me is this: if God tells the person with 2 tunics to give one away, what would he tell the person with a wardrobe full of clothes? (Often meet people who say: 'I'm not religious' as if that was a separate box involved obsession over tedious rituals – I could ask... EXPAND) Religion means loving your neighbour, serving the poor.)

Finally, if I finished here, this might just end up as another of those sermons which can be summarised as 'try harder'. But thankfully, John doesn't finish here. He knows we need help with this stuff. He knows he is not the messiah, and he goes on to give them one more piece of advice: READ v15-16. If the first two pieces of advice were lay down the crowns and walk the talk, the final one is the most important: **desire the fire**. You see, John was the first human being in history to be filled with the Holy Spirit from birth – Luke told us that back in 1:15. He knew instinctively that just trying harder is no good – we need the fire, we need the Spirit. Only God can make us good, only God can change our hearts so we *want* to share what we have with our neighbour, we *want* to be honest in all our dealings, we *want* to bless rather than take advantage of people.

Jesus later called John the greatest human being in history, but John's response was that the coming Messiah is so much greater. The only thing that an apprentice rabbi would not do for their master was to untie the thong of their sandals. But the one John refers to is so much greater that even he is unworthy to do that menial task for him. Jesus brings the fire, Jesus brings the power to change, to live the new reality that God is birthing here in the desert. And what's true then is true now: Jesus brings the fire, so we must desire it, we must desire the fire, the fire of His Spirit, the fire which cleanses us and refines us and makes us burn in the world bringing warmth and light. We need the fire!

As I close: following Jesus is the most exciting thing in the world. I love to emphasise the adventure, the joy, the purpose. But there is also a cost, and John makes that clear here. It's not for spiritual tourists. It also means laying down our sense of entitlement, it means walking the talk with radical obedience. Thankfully it also means receiving the fire, the power to live this kind of life.

Nonetheless, John himself paid the price for that integrity. Herod put him in prison and eventually executed him. By God's grace that may not be our cost, but the challenge here is clear, isn't it? It's one thing to go into the desert seeking the Messiah, seeking the new thing God is doing. But are we prepared, both as individuals and as a church, for what we might find when we get there?