

John the Baptist prepares the way

The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service on 16 December 2018 by the Vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster.

Luke 3:7-18

What then should we do? That's the refrain running through this morning's Gospel reading. After John the Baptist has given them a good tongue-lashing (it's really not surprising you don't see him feature on many Christmas cards), the crowds don't complain about guilt-inducing religion or spiritual abuse, instead they ask, "What then should we do?" The tax collectors, not generally known as sensitive souls, come and ask for baptism and say, "Teacher, what should we do?" And even the soldiers are touched by John's message: they too say, "And we, what should we do?"

And with all these people there is a sense in the air that something has got to change: they're tired of the old ways; they're tired of serving only their own interests; they're tired of empty religion that doesn't change anything. So when John announces that God is near, that the Lord is coming, they are ready to respond. And the only question is how: "What then should we do, exactly?" And it might well be a question for today.

I wonder if it's a question you've ever asked yourself: "In the light of my faith, If I'm trusting that Jesus is real, that he died to give me life, to take away the sins of the past and to open up hope for the future, what then should I do?"

It's a good question not least because it might expose our lack of urgency.

In the reading, people ask what they are to do with a real sense of insistence and urgency, almost desperation. They're convinced that the Kingdom of God is about to break in and they know they're not ready for it. And they need help to know how to change, and the people who are asking what they should do are not religious people. They're the equivalents of the drug dealers and the dodgy landlords and the loan sharks of today. They can't handle too much religion or too much theology.

They need some pretty basic instruction. So John keeps it simple: if you've got surplus food or clothing, share it with those who have nothing; if you're in a position to profit from your job at other people's expense, then don't; if you're stronger than someone else don't exploit them. These are pretty simple rules for the playground: play nicely children; share your toys; don't snatch; keep your hands to yourself; don't bite or scratch. But there's more to this than simple morality.

What John is recognising and trying to teach, is that if God is near, then people can face the future with a totally different attitude. If God is near, we don't have to protect ourselves from the future by stockpiling goods for ourselves, and by seeing everyone else as a threat we have to overcome. If God is near, we don't have to worry about not having enough or about other people taking advantage of us. If God is near, we don't have to be anxious about coping with change in our lives and in our world, because the future in the end isn't in our hands, it's in His.

John identifies the fact that the greed and competitiveness and violence that is so much part of human nature, is the result of anxiety about the future. It's the result of people's needs to try and protect themselves from all of life's uncertainties.

But if God is coming, if He is near, surely we have nothing to lose. We can be set free to be more available for each other and instead of grabbing things for ourselves, we can share them with those who have nothing; instead of feathering our own nests, we can speak up on behalf of others; instead of consuming the planet and its resources now, we might risk living differently so that there's still something left for our grandchildren; instead of living by the laws of the jungle, we can start to learn the patterns of grace.

That's what John is recognising. Tomorrow belongs not to me in my strength, but to God, in His grace and mercy, so we can face the future with openness and trust with open hearts and open hands without anxiety and fear: if, of course, we are convinced that God is near.

And that is the problem for you and me today.

I wonder, when do you expect to meet God: in church on Sunday? when you're saying your prayers every morning? at Christmas perhaps? or when you die? Or does God

seem so remote that he doesn't seem likely to turn up at all? If there is no sense that God might be approaching, there will be no urgency, there will be no sense that we should "do" anything. We shall just be stuck with all the old fears and anxieties leading to the same old injustices.

So perhaps we should begin by praying that we might notice the approach of God, moment by moment, and day by day. That we might pay attention to the signs of His Kingdom: those small acts of altruism; the little gestures of generosity and kindness; the more costly acts of self-sacrifice. We need to pray that we will notice the voices lifted up calling for justice, for help for the weak and the vulnerable, so that we can then add our voice to them. Let us learn to practise living as citizens of God's kingdom and then we will discover that He is more real: live as if the Lord is near, and he will indeed draw near. Learn to look out for the kingdom, and you will see it take shape before your eyes.

At the end of the passage, John contrasts his ministry with that of the coming King: "I baptise you with water, but one who is more powerful than I, is coming. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit, and fire."

John's baptism was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. In other words it dealt with the past - it washed away what was wrong before. But the realm of the Holy Spirit is the future, when the Spirit breaks into people's lives: he brings with him a glimpse of eternity. It's the Holy Spirit who enables people to live by faith, looking forward, filling them with the love that casts out fear.

So what then should we do? May I suggest we should begin by seeking the Holy Spirit: pray for the coming of the Holy Spirit into your life and into our world; be renewed by the Holy Spirit; keep in step with the Holy Spirit; become a temple of the Holy Spirit. Then you will find you are set free from your fear of the future, and God will use you instead to shape the future, after the pattern of His son.