

Advent 3 C 2024 / 15 December 2024

St Michael and All Angels

Homily / Deacon Robert Jamieson

Zeph 3:14-20

Phil 4:4-7

Luke 3:7-18

Today's reading offers us themes of baptism, judgement, repentance, the insufficient nature of religious and cultural affiliation, new kingdom values, the anticipation of the Messiah, the fire of the Holy Spirit and the need to proclaim the good news of the gospel.

Our text begins with John's rather confronting words. Words—that I am sure none of us would wish to hear describing ourselves. However, John does name certain audience members as a “brood of vipers.” What exactly does John mean, and why has he been so angered? It is likely that the people who came to John were familiar with baptism as a religious ritual associated with spiritual cleansing and a public display of adherence to a particular religious sect. Accordingly, in the ancient Near East culture, it was not uncommon for those who joined religious groups to publicly demonstrate their commitment by becoming baptised. However, their lives and attitudes often did not change or deeply reflect the proposition of their baptism. In other words, they saw their baptism or affiliation to a religious culture or ethnicity as sufficient to ‘make them right’ before a god and their society, but without the necessary transformation of life that should follow. And it is likely that this attitude and perspective would have angered John the Baptist.

Therefore, it is helpful to acknowledge that John proclaimed a “baptism of repentance” (Luke 3:3; Mark 1:4; Acts 19:4) and that those who were baptised were to “bear fruits worthy of repentance.” Thus, fruitfulness represents a tree which is living, and as such, ‘fruitfulness,’ is a perceivable and tangible witness to a life deeply rooted in God—the source of all life and being (Acts 17:28).

Consequently, John is calling his listeners to be sincere before God and to repent with the knowledge that their faith must signal a transformation of heart and mind. Leading the newly baptised to desire a way of 'living differently in the world.' Recipients of John's baptism were to reject the old fallen ways intentionally. Thus, learning to emulate lives that demonstrate the values of God's coming new kingdom, which will later be fully embodied in Christ.

Moreover, failure to "bear good fruit" or to become 'unfruitful' signals a disconnection from life in God and may result in an unfavourable judgment, what we may see as God's wrath—which we can understand as God removing his blessing from our lives or allowing our withdrawal from him to result in our demise.

So, understandably, the crowds ask, "What, then, should we do?" John replies, "Whoever has two coats/tunics must share with anyone who has none." Here, John's answer echoes the new kingdom's values of 'love of neighbour' by caring for one another's basic needs.

Accordingly, The coat or tunic in our reading is effectively an undergarment or an item of underwear, so John's metaphor of a 'tunic' underscores the fundamental Christian principle of caring for humanity's basic needs and dignity. Here, John demonstrates to us that economic issues are spiritual issues.

Furthermore, in the Greek, asking, "What should we do?" implies "What should we perform, and what should we produce? Subsequently, from this understanding, we see that performance and action matter; forgiveness and repentance must lead to action. Tax collectors and soldiers receive similar charges: they are to deal honestly and justly with others when they might be expected instead to exploit their positions."

Interestingly, "John does not demand that the tax collectors and soldiers find new employment. Instead, he challenges them to work from the position of a 'baptism of repentance and to bear good fruits' within the day-to-day activities of their duties." Essentially, if they accept John's baptism, they are being called to reject the corruption of their former life and embrace the values of God's new kingdom, namely, "To act justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with their God" (Micah 6:8).

Subsequently, John's authority, mana and speaking led the crowds to believe that John the Baptist may be the awaited Messiah. However, John quickly distinguishes between his baptism of water and Christ's baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire. So, today, as Christians, how might we understand the role of Holy Fire in our baptism and daily life?

Allow me to offer these suggestions: firstly, fire can be seen as a type of refinement, a mechanism of purging and purification, burning away the chaff or the dead and unhelpful aspects of our lives (Malachi 3:2; Matthew 3:12; Luke 3:17). Also, Fire is used to melt and refine metals, creating more stable and bonded materials (Zechariah 13:9; Revelation 3:18).

Next, fire represents a type of strengthening and empowerment, remembering that the fires of Pentecost began the Church and allowed diverse groups of people to hear and understand one another (Acts 2:3). Lastly, John is offering his audience the sobering realisation of 'fire' as a metaphor for God's coming and final day of judgement whereby the 'wind,' *the Holy Spirit* (John 3:8; Acts 2:1-4; Genesis 1:2; Genesis 2:7; 1 Kings 19:12) will separate the 'chaff,' the dry husks, the dead parts of our lives, and burn that chaff with "unquenchable fire."

Nonetheless—however we choose to look at Christ's baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire, "it is important to realise that John presents his baptismal activity as an anticipation of the coming Messiah. John's baptism prepares the way for Christ's work so that the people are ready to believe and receive Christ's new covenant."

Today's gospel places John and all of us who accept Christ—into God's redemptive work and activity in the world. It also signifies that John's mission marks the onset of the Advent of our Lord Jesus Christ and his kingdom of peace.

"John has focused his teaching on economic and social practices that are compassionate and just." Let us remember that Jesus will call all of us to do the same.

As such, "any community of people who receives baptism should be marked by compassionate care for the needy, a strong sense of peace, love, justice and the desire to overturn the powers of darkness in whatever forms it may appear.

John may have preached in a distant wilderness. However, his message of mercy and repentance directs all people, you and I, back into our homes, our suburbs and places of work to begin the task of restoring authentic communities of hope, peace and love.”

So, in this season of Advent, as we go out into the day and the following week, let us all, with a sincere heart before God, strive to “bear fruits worthy of our baptism.”

Amen.