**Advent 3 (Stowe) Zephaniah 3: 14-end**

**Luke 3: 6-18**

**John the Baptist and Judgement**

I have always thought that John the Baptist might have been a tricky person to accommodate in polite society. He tended to say what he thought in plain terms, without any consideration as to the consequences, which the verses following our gospel spell out for us. He upset Herod, this was not the Herod of the Christmas story but his son or grandson, I forget which, and went to prison succumbing to the vengeful nature of Herodias a little later. We may note, however, that the people loved to hear him, even if they didn’t entirely like what they heard. There was a recognition of a completely unvarnished truth being expounded to them. What ws perhaps lacking was the personal application thereof

Now you might not, indeed you would not know from the OT reading that in this respect he was like Zephaniah, whose short book, apart from these few verses is unmitigated gloom and judgement. He was so chapter 1 tells us both an African on one side- that is what Cushite means and the great grandson of King Hezekiah and like him faithful to God, unlike the terrible Manasseh whose 45 year reign was one of unmitigated apostasy. Zephaniah, preaching at the start of Josiah’s reign and before Josiah’s reforms had really go going preached judgement for all that Manasseh had done. Suddenly at the end of his book there is sweetness and light. This is the other side of the day of the LORD, in the words of the Dies Irae, Day of Wrath and doom impending, but also deliverance for the oppressed faithful. A suitable reading Advent when we look forward to our Lord’s return in Glory, promise to us and threat to others although everyone, believer, non believer and agnostic will all stand before the judgement throne of God, where we will rely solely upon the righteousness of the Lord Jesus. Which does not mean believe and say and do whatever you like.

John the Baptist is preaching in the same vein. A true, prophet, the last of them defending the righteousness of God and warning people without distinction as to rank to repent. Humanity is like a ship with a single propeller, inevitably tending to turn slowly off course unless corrected by the rudder. To **produce fruits worthy of repentance.**

Thus, as one commentator puts it *As an audience friendly soundbite ‘****brood of vipers’*** *we may feel, leaves something to be desired. Yet it is another example of the thread running through our Advent readings, which is that the coming of Christ is disturbing and brings about radical changes. Last week Luke 3 1-6 (*which Pauline spoke on*) dealt with the transformation of the desert and the removal of obstacle to the King’s coming. Here in today’s reading this is translated into the spiritual and ethical spheres*

The hot comment about **children for Abraham from these very stones** Comes aboutbecause they were, and for that matter still are the chosen people of God the Jews of Jesus day had a superiority complex – or at least some of them did - at least the equivalent of some of our Missionary bretheren from the 19th century whose seemed to think that the only civilisation that had ever existed was the Anglo Saxon one.

But this is not enough. Baptism by John, as indeed baptism now without repentance is meaningless. You may consider what that has to say about the C of ED’as baptism policies. Not being John the Baptist I shall pass that hot potato by.

**What then shall we do?**  The crowds say, so at least in some cases there is recognition of the fact the John has a valid point. When we speak bluntly about sin at least some in society will recognise it and ask what needs doing. AS In John and Jesus’s day other will take offence of consider it impractical.

We can ask exactly the same questions and face the same difficulty in making that ethical transformation that everyone who seeks to obey God and follow Jesus always faces. In a fallen world it is inevitably hard to do the right thing. We fool ourselves if we think otherwise.

Please note that John gives practical answers. Ethics is about what we do or don’t do or say so it is by its nature intensely practical. Surely the application of spiritual truth is practical. Once you have read the book - holy scripture- then you need to walk the walk.

If you take a compass bearing on a map and want to get where you are going then you have to follow the compass bearing. Or in modern parlance don’t bother with google maps or the sat nav. if you are not going to follow the directions.

We can universally apply the first of John’s instructions about sharing. Food banks, support for aid agencies and so on are for us entirely obvious and not hard to do, apart perhaps from on the bank balance. But John does not say if you have two cloaks give both away. I wish that at national level we had not cut our aid budget nor sat on our vaccine stores nor been quite so difficult about refugees though we can all see that a complete free for all would be disastrous for us and the refugees. Try writing to Greg Smith our MP to protest about the aid cut or not sharing our vaccines. He is easy to email.

The other two instructions are specific to the particular professions but applicable in a wider context. The tax gathers used their position to feather their own nests at the expense of the poor. Take only what you are entitled to is a universally applicable principle.

The soldiers are told not to abuse their power. How relevant that is in today’s world. Individuals, countries and corporations need to hear that. The ethical use of power and authority is a huge challenge. We might be able to use might to do right but might is not always right.

For John’s hearers and now readers and Zephaniah’s for that matter hearing the instruction is the start. It is what comes next that counts. What those with two cloaks did about it, or the tax gathers doing a Zacchaeus, of the soldiers not behaving like thugs. What is the challenge John would have made to us and what will you and I do about it?.