

Sunday 15th December – Advent 3 – Luke 3:7-18 ‘Spirit and Fire’ **ONLINE ONLY**

You bunch of snakes. Why are you watching this today? Who told you to do that? What do you think you gain by tuning in? Think about our churchyard – 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. 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. So you want a Messiah, do you? Be careful what you wish for.

And as he shares his message with his listeners, John gives them, and us, clear messages: the first is this, **lay down the crowns**. Or as John says in v8: 'Do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our father." For I tell you that out of these stones, God can raise up children for Abraham.' In other words, 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, seeking baptism, which in itself was a hugely significant thing. 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. God only has children, not grandchildren and our qualification is a life transformed by God's wonderful grace.

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. Second, we have to **walk the talk**. That's his pretty blunt message isn't it? V8 again: 'Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.' Walk the talk. 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, in verses 10-14: share generously, don't rip people off, don't abuse your power.

It's not rocket science, is it! Obedience is usually easy to understand but hard to do. 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 challenges me when I read this is: if God tells the person with 2 tunics to give one away, what would he tell the person with a wardrobe full of clothes?

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: 'I baptise you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come – he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.'

If the first two pieces of advice were vital, 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 that 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!**

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 ready for what we might find when we get there?

As we journey this Advent, may God grant us all grace to lay down the crowns, walk the talk, and desire the fire. Amen.