

St Marc, Grenoble
Sunday 12th December 2021 (Advent 3)
Philippians 4: 4- 7
Luke 3: 7 - 18
'What should we do?'

Good morning to you all, both here in Church and those joining us on Zoom
Pray

How are you getting on with your Advent preparation? Is anyone using different daily devotions or using the 'At the Heart of Christmas' app??

Recently, I described John the Baptist as being rather like a Street Corner Evangelist; and this week's Gospel reading continues that image. John's warnings of doom for those not prepared to repent and be baptised were salient and very harsh – he offered NO soft options!

Yet, remarkably, hundreds or possibly even thousands of people appeared to take heed of what he had to say. Mass baptisms were the order of the day, and people queued up to be baptised in the River Jordan.
Why do you think John's message had such a remarkable effect??

His message was not at all gentle or polite to most of those who came to be baptised. He certainly did not waste time with pleasantries and he wasn't politically correct. He suggested that many of the people who came were like a 'brood of vipers'! His message definitely *demand*ed a radical response!

I was very interested in the question he asked: 'Who told you to escape from the coming anger?' - In effect he was saying 'Why are you coming to be baptised?'

That's a question I often ask - even here in Grenoble, although I hope it doesn't sound as angry and aggressive, 'What is prompting you to be baptised??' I wonder sometimes if people feel baptism is an 'insurance policy' to ensure God doesn't overlook them on the day of judgement.

Anyway, John's 'voice in the wilderness' had a remarkable effect, the crowds, the tax collectors and even soldiers asked 'What should we do? And John's answer was - 'Don't try and hide behind the faith of your ancestors.'

'Prove your personal repentance by bearing the proper fruit - because the axe is already standing by the roots of the tree - ready to cut it down if it doesn't bear good fruit.'

It is a graphic word picture - just as current today as it was then. Where we used to live in Kent, there were dozens of fruit farms and I often travelled past them on the train. (I've seen similar fruit farms here in France).

At the end of the fruit season, the farmers go around, rooting up and grubbing out any diseased or damaged trees, or those that have not fruited well, because there is no space to be wasted. Unfruitful, damaged or useless trees are grubbed out and burned to prevent the spread of disease.

John's response to questions from the crowds: "What shall we do??" stands the test of time too – just as relevant today as it was then. "Anyone who has two coats should give one to someone who doesn't have one – and the same applies to anyone who has plenty of food."

It's not just the doing, which is important; the attitude, or the mindset with which the actions are made are equally, or possibly more, important. Our faith demands a deep-seated radical and challenging response.

And, it's as relevant corporately and nationally as it is individually. International aid arrangements are, so often, little more than a hollow sham, closely linked to trade quotas, and international debt.

There are very few governments, who are prepared to be genuinely open handed, that has been clearly demonstrated recently in the way Covid vaccinations have been shared (or not) around the world. What example does this duplicitous action of governments give to individuals?

John makes it clear it's not just do-gooding social action, which is important (although it is) – but, as Christians, we should be setting an example and challenging our politicians too; we should be open, honest and caring for each other. But are we??

As Christians we need to be modelling integrity, honesty, and caring in our places of work – Do we??

If we don't, we're in effect unfruitful, useless – and we can expect simply to be thrown out, and burned, like chaff at harvest time. John warned that the Messiah would come wielding a winnowing fork – to sort out the mess of discarded husk waste on the threshing floor of life.

So, what kind of fruitful response was John demanding?? Generosity, care, honesty, integrity, justice ...

These things that John was expecting are not difficult, or extravagant – they simply show a basic commitment to caring for others; and they are just the same today. But it's not just the deeds that are important, it's the complete

lifestyle and behaviour, which demonstrates a real acceptance of the

commandments and a truly valid reflection of God's love for *all* of us.

John's message made such an impact that many began asking the question 'in their hearts' as to whether John might be the Messiah. But his reply was crystal clear – 'I'm baptising with water. But, someone much more powerful is coming, who is much stronger than I am. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire!'

During His ministry on earth, Jesus often pointed out it's not what we do, or what we don't do, that guarantees our place in the Kingdom of heaven – it is our acceptance of Jesus – our total acceptance of Him and His love into the very fibre of our lives – which ensures our salvation.

And that's an appropriate place to have just a brief reflection on our reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians - Paul says:

'Celebrate joyfully in the Lord, all the time. I'll say it again: celebrate! Let everybody know how gentle and gracious you are. The Lord is near. Don't worry about anything. Rather, in every area of life let God know what you want, as you pray and make requests, and give thanks as well. And God's peace, which is greater than we can ever understand, will keep guard over your hearts and minds in King Jesus.'

You see, these are the things that happen if we adopt the actions and the lifestyle John the Baptist was talking about, if we allow the love of Jesus to pervade our lives and reflect through them.

Jesus is The way, the truth and the life, who leads us into God's Holy presence. How does that relate to the way we live our lives, both in our homes, our neighbourhoods and our workplaces??

The key is the Holy Spirit, who will empower those open to Him working in, with and through them

– is your life truly open to Him??

Let's pray ...