



St Andrew's Parish Church Guernsey
Sunday, 12 December 2021 – Advent 3
Readings: Zephaniah 3:14-end St Luke 3: 7-18
Given by Rev Juliette E C Robilliard

Telling it as it is!

'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance!' Unsurprisingly, that greeting of John the Baptist to the people who sought him, is not included as a technique in the book 'How to win friends and influence people' (*Dale Carnegie*). No one could accuse John of massaging his message merely to be popular. Holding that thought, if I asked you to give a snapshot of his personality, the words loveable and hugable may not spring to mind. And yet, the Gospel says crowds sought him in the wilderness not only to hear him but also, to be baptised by him. So, what was it about John that drew people to him? Quite simply, what you saw was what you got. No fine, flowing robes; no finely turned phrases. He spoke from his heart with honesty and integrity and, they believed the truthfulness of his statements. Let's try to get inside John's mind to understand where his thoughts were coming from and how, from the depths of his faith, he influenced people.

Life moves faster at the edge

We know from other parts of the gospels that John lived in the wilderness and ate a simple diet sourced from the natural environment. We could view his hermit-like existence as living beyond the margins of society. However, by his very distance from the treadmill that society and work imposed on people, he was able to observe more acutely. The semi-oppressive regime under the occupying Roman forces was an issue but the real stumbling block to peoples' freedom of heart and faith was the doctrine that had been handed down from one generation of religious leaders to another. Instead of opening up an accessible pathway to God for all to follow, religion had become an unachievable ritual for the majority: John discerned this with clarity of vision. Seeing through to the heart of the matter, far from being on the margins of society, his love and devotion for all people showed a deep-rooted sense of belonging and longing to draw them with him to God in enlivened faith. With his insight, he had captured the attention of both Jew and Gentile alike and, without any flim-flam he informed them of what they needed to hear.

What to do?

John's message, though echoing Zephaniah speaking of judgement and repentance, was effective as people sensed that he was trying to help them: so, they cried out 'What should we do?' John answered, not by thrusting doctrine down their throats, nor religious ritual but suggesting simple actions, such as sharing what they owned and being honest in their

business dealings. In other words, loving their neighbour as their self, borne from a genuine reverence and love of God. Symbolic of their decision to live their faith in action, the people were baptised.

Temptation v humility

Such was the dynamic effect of John's ministry that the people began to speculate whether he might not be the Messiah. Oh! The temptation to say that he was! But very he simply stated that he was not. In words echoing Isaiah, John told them that Christ was indeed coming: he would not only baptise with water but also with the Holy Spirit and fire! Humble penitents would be transformed, as their sinful impurity was burnt away. But, be warned, those who refused to acknowledge their sins would be utterly consumed. Underpinning it all, however, was the loving message that God considered people worthy to be saved, it's still the same message today.

How do we match up?

Advent is a good time to kick the tyres of our faith. In the midst of the hustle and bustle that our several commitments demand of us, do we make time each day, figuratively, to step out into the quiet of the wilderness to be still before God? Do we discern the dross that is cluttering our lives affecting our souls? How often do we see the need to repent and resolve to live more compassionately, humbly and honestly, as John urged? Or, does the word judgment so conjure God's flames of wrath that the thought of laying our souls bare to address our faults, is too challenging. Last week I read an article which included this quote which may be a more helpful way to think of repentance and God's judgement: the late Cardinal Basil Hume said, "To be judged is to whisper the story of your life into the ear of an all-loving Father". In that light, repentance and loving judgement enables transformation to guide our actions. What, therefore, is fruit worthy of repentance? It will be different for each one of us. Perhaps, putting ourselves in another person's shoes and seeing life from their perspective rather than judging them from ours? Or, sharing more of our disposal income with those who have little? Or, simply being humble and kind with others. We all have our own particular weaknesses. God knows that and is ever ready to forgive us, we just need to give him our attention, to recognise what in our lives needs to be shed, so that we may love him more dearly and, with the Holy Spirit's help, show it in our lives.

And finally ...

One further question to ponder: do we welcome or, fear the Holy Spirit's fire? Amen.