

"Advent 3 - The Baptist Warned"

Sunday 13th December 2009

Karen Senior

Readings:

Zephaniah 3: 14-20

Psalm 146: 5-10

Luke 3: 7-18

The trailers that the BBC are playing over and over at present, are implying that Christmas isn't Christmas without the Dr Who Christmas special.

So this morning I'd like us to try a bit of time travelling now.....but this is very low budget time travelling.... we don't have a Tardis so it all depends on our imaginations.....!

Thinking back to that reading which Hazel read – let's go back about 2000 years to the region of the Jordan, and try to imagine finding ourselves caught up in crowds of people, all heading out of the villages, with a sense of eager curiosity.

We are in the Roman Empire. Emperor Augustus, the first Roman Emperor, who Luke records as the ruler who called the census when Jesus was born, died about 15 years ago and his adopted son Tiberius is now in charge.....and like so many political leaders, he began well, but his popularity has begun to decrease.....

Even so - Roman Emperors were worshipped as gods, and some of the people of the empire were very happy to worship Tiberius quite enthusiastically.

We are in the Jordan valley, and Rome has been the occupying force for about 100 years....but until about 25 years earlier this place was pretty much on the edge of the Empire. Now it feels like the forces of the occupying Romans are increasing. For the last 25 years or so there has been a Roman Governor resident in the area....well when I say resident *in the area*, he wasn't living in the little villages in the Jordan valley where these crowds lived. He lived on the Mediterranean coast at Caesarea – a proper Roman name for a town – where the sun twinkles off a beautiful blue sea, where his palace includes a sea-water swimming pool – the foundations of which are well enough built to last into the 21st Century – but the Governor won't know that. Caesarea is like a little bit of Rome overseas..... there is an amphitheatre, again built to last, there is culture, and there is fresh water brought in by an impressive system of water supplies.

But the crowds we are among, the crowds from this morning's reading, don't live lives anything like their Roman governor. They are the native people in an occupied land. They are the powerless and the poor, and the Romans' system of crucifixion proved they have zero tolerance for criminals and terrorists.

These crowds have their own Jewish rulers too..... the infamous Herods... most of us have heard about the Herods and what we hear is never good news. Herod the Great, who ordered all the baby boys in the Bethlehem region to be killed after he heard about Jesus' birth, had died soon after that time, and his sons who succeeded him are even less popular, self made royalty ruling by fear and oppression, collaborating with the Romans to make the most of the opportunities that power brings them.

Then there are the high priests, who should have stood in contrast to the political leaders, but they too fail to lead well – they are a mixed bunch, and of course if they try to stand against the authorities they risk being brutally put down.

And these crowds were once a people who had a God who called them "his people."

They were the nation begun by Abraham....God had promised him "I will make you into a

great nation and I will bless you....and they were going to be a blessing to all the peoples on the earth."

"Yeah right," most of them would probably say if you ask them about it.

Their ancestors had been slaves in Egypt, and God had rescued them from slavery then – he'd sent Moses and a whole load of plagues to show the Egyptian Pharaoh that he meant business....and in the end Pharaoh had sent them on their way with stashes of Egyptian treasure – they'd passed through the waters of the Red Sea, and the Egyptians chasing after them, 'cos Pharaoh had changed his mind, had all drowned!

And these crowds have heard that story every year at the Passover festival, their parents and their grandparents told it to them, and now they tell it to their children and grandchildren.... but it all seems like a wonderful story from the good old days, more than an thousand years ago actually.

The fact is, they will say, "Here we are, pretty much slaves to the Romans in our own land, so where is the God who rescued our ancestors?"

"In fact", they will say "God has been absolutely silent for 400 years since the prophet Malachi spoke for him. It was said that God would send another prophet like Elijah, but that was 400 years ago and a lot of generations have come and gone since then, and God has been silent....so what happened to us being his special people?"

So.... we have to ask them, some of the individuals who make up this crowd -
"What's happening?" "Where are you all going?"

And they aren't giving us a very clear answer, but between them they speak of a new prophet.

"He has a look of the wild man of the desert about him"

"That's because he has lived in the desert"

"He preaches, and he baptises people. Some call him the baptiser"

"They say his clothes are made of camel hair and he eats locusts and wild honey"

"But he says that the kingdom of heaven is near, and that the ancient prophecies are about to come to pass"

And as these people tell you *why* they are off to hear this prophet, you get the impression that some of them are hoping passionately for it to be true – for God to be speaking again after all those years of silence...and you can tell that others of them are really just coming along for the entertainment – after all this guy has something of a reputation – if only for his strange fashion sense, or his culinary skills.

But they keep going ... and we've walked a long way now in the heat and the dust, and the relentless sunshine, and suddenly someone in front points and calls out, and everyone squints into the sun, and this must be him, striding towards us from out of the desert.

"You brood of vipers!! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?"

and there is a sudden silence. The sort of silence which is a mixture of shock and embarrassment, and no-one quite knows what to do or to say next.

And he continues.....

"Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And don't 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. The axe is ready at the root of the trees and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

More silence..... "what should we do then?" someone asks, and then lots of others echo the same question, like crowds do when someone has spoken up first.....

And the prophet doesn't say "improve your prayer life" or "have more faith in God" - his answers are completely practical.

Share what you have, - your food and your clothes ...
Don't cheat to get more than you are entitled to ...
Don't extort money or accuse people falsely.

And there's still a silence but it is an eager silence now, and everyone is wondering, and someone just behind you murmurs the question being asked in that silence
"Is he the messiah?"

And he answers that fairly and squarely, ... "I'm not the Christ. I baptise with water, but the messiah will be in a different league altogether... *I'm* not worthy to do even the most menial of tasks for *him*. I'll baptise you in this river waters but He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire"

And he goes on talking of fire and judgement, and good news, and the crowd seem ok with that because they accept that God has to be a God of judgement, but we 21st Century people feel a bit uncomfortable because fire and brimstone type preaching seems to us to be "so last century"

.....

And so here we are again, in December 2009, and what are we to make of Luke's account of John the Baptist?

There's a cartoon showing a man shouting up to heaven - "God, if you are there, tell us what we should do?"

And a voice replies "feed the hungry, house the homeless, work for justice" ...

and the man replies "aah only testing!"

"Me too" replies the voice.

I was wondering this week - who are the prophets in our world today?

I was watching the documentary about Joan Baez on the TV, and saw Martin Luther King campaigning for peace and justice in the civil rights protests in the US - and I thought he was probably a prophet.....but that's half a century ago - are there prophets now?

I thought of Bono and Bob Geldof who use their fame and influence to speak out for the world's poor,

Of the Archbishop of York, who chopped his dog collar in half and said he won't wear it again until justice is restored in Zimbabwe,

Then of course just yesterday the Archbishop of Canterbury was telling the government it was time they stopped seeing faith as a problem in society.

I thought of the protestors who marched through London last weekend - Tearfund supporters and Christian Aid supporters, marching with Friends of the earth and Climate Camp protestors, speaking out for the health of the planet - but particularly for the effects that climate change is having on the poor in the world.

I thought of Steve Chalke and his work to stop People trafficking - and the Fairtrade chocolate campaigners who have this year have persuaded Cadbury's and now Nestle to begin to go Fairtrade.

But if John the Baptist came shouting out of the woods behind the community centre what would his message be to us?

Just because we come to church, it doesn't mean our lives are how God wants them to be.

Going back to the documentary about Joan Baez - she said:

"If you're committed to singing meaningful songs - you've got to be committed to living a life that backs them up"

We sing about a God of justice here when we gather ... but how committed are we to living lives which back up the words we sing?

In New Testament times, Baptism was a way of people showing that they had converted to Judaism. But the crowds who came out to hear John *were* Jews ... and yet these Jews got baptised, to show that they needed to start again, to leave behind the old life and start a new one.

If we were to read further in Luke's Gospel we would read that Jesus was baptised by John. He didn't need to repent of a sinful life and make a new start, and John wasn't comfortable with the idea of baptising him. Jesus was identifying with the people he had come to save.

In the 21st Century baptism means different things to Christians from different backgrounds... for some it marks a turning point when they had committed their lives to Christ, for some it happened in childhood and was followed by confirmation. But just as the people of John's day couldn't sit back and relax and depend on the fact that they had Jewish ancestry, we can't be complacent about what God requires of us just because we have been baptised ... or confirmed ... or belong to a homegroup ... or whatever.

"The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same"

As someone who has far too many clothes in her wardrobe and plenty of food in the kitchen, how do I respond to that? In a world where so many live and die in abject poverty, how do I share from my plenty?

I don't doubt I could have a good clear out and benefit the charity shops, but is that enough? Is that the point? Can I feel comfortable that I have done enough? Probably not – and that's why as a church we support Tearfund who have a ten-year vision to see 50 million people released from material and spiritual poverty through a worldwide network of 100,000 local churches. And even as a Tearfund supporter I don't feel comfortable that I'm ok, doing my bit? Yet I suspect should be far more worried if I *did* feel complacent about that.

Global injustice is the reason why Tearfund and Christian Aid are both represented in Copenhagen ... climate change is already ruining livelihoods and threatening life itself in many poor countries. Are we concerned? Are we praying for the outcome of the summit?

And what about the tax collectors John advised? There's been lots said about our taxes this week by politician of all parties gearing up for election season. The Roman Empire's version of the Inland Revenue was rather more rough and ready. ...the Romans franchised out the local taxing rights to the highest bidder. The successful bidder paid Rome the fee they demanded, and then he needed to add a legitimate margin of profit. But how big a profit margin was legitimate? The bigger the profit, the more hated the tax collector, and the more he was hated, the more he felt inclined to up his rates ... and as for the Romans – they really didn't care because they they'd got their guaranteed tax income already....

Yet despite the fact that they were in business with the hated Romans John didn't tell the tax collectors to quit their jobs. He just said not to collect any more money than they were required to.

And the soldiers – who were almost certainly either Herod's soldiers or Jewish soldiers who provided security for the tax collectors, they were told not to extort money, or accuse people falsely, and to be content with their pay.

So what would John the Baptist ask of us?

To be generous ... to be content ... to avoid extortion. I hope there aren't many of us who are extortionists.... but in the global economy of which we find ourselves a part, there are times when we know that our bargains are at others' expense, whether it's chocolate which might

have been made from slave laboured cocoa harvests, or jeans constructed in a sweatshop in the Far East.

Justice isn't an optional extra for Christians with an overdeveloped social conscience – our God is a God of Justice...and what he asks of us can be summed up in the words of another Old Testament prophet.....

“He has showed you O man what is good, and what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God”