

Sermon for Sunday 16.12.18

We begin the third week of advent today and draw closer to the coming of the Christ Child into the world.

Each day during the coming week ahead, the bible readings from our lectionary take us on an interesting journey. For instance on this coming Monday we are taken right back to Abraham in the genealogy of Jesus through the line of Joseph.

On Tuesday we hear the story of Joseph who had thoughts to dismiss Mary when he found out that she was with child, and how he was visited by an angel in a dream that turned this decision around.

On Wednesday, we ponder the story of Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth and the birth of John the Baptist.

Thursday holds for us that wonderful story of the annunciation when Mary was visited by the angel and told that she would conceive and bare a son.

On Friday we travel with Mary to her cousin Elizabeth with whom she will stay for 3 months.

And on Saturday we are privy to Mary and Elizabeth's companionship together and Mary expressing her joy in the words of the Magnificat.

So in the days of this coming week we will be drawing very close to the birth of the baby in the manger at Bethlehem.

Today, however, we are at the river Jordan with John the Baptist at a time of great expectation. This is the time when people lived in the hope that their much loved God would come to them.

The old prophets had spoken of a time of renewal, through which God himself would come back to them. John brought the people new hope that the time was close at hand for this great event. In preparation, he preached the way of repentance which in real terms means a return to God with heart and soul.

John's ministry echoed the words from Malachi ch3, *Return to me, and I will return to you.*

He preached with a sense of urgency –didn't beat around the bush – but went straight to the point.

John told the people that when the day of the lord arrived, their claim to be safe from judgement simply because they were children of Abraham was not going to cut it - righteousness is very much a characteristic that we are called to grow into individually. No one can ride home to God on righteousness that belongs to someone else. *God can raise up descendants of Abraham from the rocks*, he tells them. Each one of them, therefore, had to bear fruit that showed that their way of life had changed for the better.

This loud and clear proclamation, got their attention!

What shall we do they said? The crowd wanted to know – the tax collectors wanted to know and soldiers wanted to know.

So John answered the crowd; give to others what you don't need. Don't hoard stuff – give away your excess so that someone else can use it or eat it.

He answered the tax collectors; don't exploit people by taking more than your quota in taxes to feather your own nest.

He answered the soldiers; don't take advantage of your position -Don't be a cruel enforcer taking your frustrations out on people – Instead, be satisfied with your lot.

The practicalities that John spoke about, highlighted a way of life that did not take advantage of others but cared for them and upheld the dignity of the person.

This is the fruit he was talking about. The same fruit that we seek to have today as Christians in society.

Now the people responded to John's teachings with amazement and awe.

Many thought he may have been the messiah they were waiting to come among them.

And, as was his way, he told them in no uncertain terms – *No it's not me!*

I'm not the messiah, I baptise you with water. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

So what does this mean – what is the difference between John's baptism with water and Jesus baptism with the Holy Spirit?

And it is a very appropriate question to ask for this is the day that Kristen and her family bring their child Piper to be baptised.

The difference I believe is that baptism with water by John was about being cleansed.

When John plunged people into the water of the river Jordan, this was a powerful sign of becoming clean so that the baptised could then repent and be healed.

There is also an historical element about the waters in the River Jordan that gave it the power to cleanse.

The Hebrew people had come through the river Jordan into the promised land when they were led out of Slavery in Egypt. Now they were in slavery again in their own land and perhaps they saw John's baptism in the Jordan as symbolic of a new exodus into freedom.

In Christian Baptism - our faith belief is that it is an outward sign of an inner Grace.

It means participating in the first Easter event with Christ – the dying and rising into a new creation. It means not only cleansing but rebirth in the power of the Spirit.

Christian baptism is about being welcomed into the Christian community and having a sense of belonging and companionship with each other and with the Holy Spirit, and being brought into the wholeness of Jesus likeness.

At Jesus baptism by John in the River Jordan when Jesus rose from the chaos of the waters, the Holy Spirit descended upon him and the voice from heaven said, *You are my son.*

Hence for the newly baptised Christian, and this will be Piper today - when her head comes up from the water, we believe in faith that the voice of God says to her, *You are my daughter,* as she begins her new life in relationship with Jesus in the Christian community.

To be baptised with the Holy Spirit writes Rowan Williams, *means to recover the humanity that God first intended. And what did God intend? He intended that human beings should grow into such love for him and such confidence in him that they could rightly be called God's sons and daughters.*¹

The baptised Christian is to be understood not as privileged, elite or separate, but as one who has accepted what it means to be in the heart of a needy, and troubled world, seeking justice and dignity for all human beings.

It can be a difficult calling - yet living in dependence and trust in God the Holy Spirit through understanding, companionship, belonging, guidance, and counsel, empowers us as it did the first apostles on the day of Pentecost.

So as we go into this third week of Advent and having some idea of what lies ahead in terms of our journey through the scripture readings for the week, let us give thanks for John the Baptist and his ministry, and also for Pipers baptism today with the Holy Spirit, as well as our own baptism.

Let us look forward to this coming week when we will hear some details of the journey that Joseph and Mary undertake so that the promise of God that he will come among us, will be fulfilled with the Christ child's birth in the manger.

The Lord be with you.

¹ Rowan Williams. *Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer*, (SPCK, London, 2014), p's 3-4.