

Homily for people and parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday 15th December 2024, Advent 3

Readings: Zephaniah 3:14-20
Philippians 4:4-7

Song of Isaiah (APBA pp391)
Luke 3:7-18

As we track ever closer to Christmas we surprisingly meet John the Baptist in the Gospel reading this weekend. The hairy prophet who lived in the desert challenging the Jewish community of his time to prepare for the arrival of the promised Messiah. He critiqued the compromise and self-interest of the religious establishment; he challenged the immoral behaviour of the Jewish King; and he suggested strongly that people needed to change the way they were living if they wanted to be ready for this new thing that God was going to do. As a sign that people were changing direction from a self-centred life to a God-centred life, John baptised them in the River Jordan.

Today's Gospel remembers three groups of people coming to John with the same question, 'What shall we do?' Whether it was before they were baptised or after they were baptised doesn't matter - it's a great question that comes from healthy self-awareness. An awareness that acknowledges things could be better in the life of the questioner – particularly in their relationship with God, and their relationships with others.

- 'What shall WE do?' asked the crowds... and John told them to be generous.
- 'What must WE do?' asked the tax-collectors... and John told them to be fair.
- 'What must WE do?' asked the soldiers... and John told them to be content with their pay, and be honest.

Very practical responses to people who genuinely wanted to honour God with their lives. I think there is wisdom in these response for us to consider and take on board. Surely generosity, fairness, and honesty are desired elements of our own, whole of life, response to God when we declare in baptism and Confirmation, 'I turn to Christ'?

So, maybe it's a good thing that we remember the call of John the Baptist to prepare... as we anticipate celebrating the birth of Christ at Christmas. Like those people of long ago we might have a similar sense that our lives as individuals, as congregations, and even as a Diocese are out of whack and could be better – particularly in our relationships with God, ourselves, and other people.

Curious, hopeful... perhaps desperate, we might be asking the same question as the crowds, the tax-collectors, and the soldiers of long ago: 'What must we do?' What can we do for those relationships to be stronger? What can we do to find a greater sense of peace and purpose in our lives?

I am a long way from John the Baptist, but I do have some ideas! As I offer them, please accept that I'm affirming their importance as much to myself as to anyone else – and maybe more so!

The first possibility for us to consider is praying a little more than we currently do and praying a little more creatively. If we're used to praying the words that other people have written... then in addition start praying with our own words. If we're used to praying with lots of words, then in addition – make time for some silent listening and contemplative prayer. We should try not to think of prayer as a chore but as an ongoing conversation that goes on throughout life. If we only pray in a special place at home, then in addition find some new places to pray – and these might be while driving or walking; cycling or weeding the yard! If we think of God as our constant companion and friend, then we won't have to talk all the time – often it's just nourishing to be conscious of being together side by side with the one we might helpfully call 'Beloved'.

The second possibility to consider is reading the Bible a little more than we currently do, and maybe do some background reading to better understand the where, when, and why of the text. A good study bible is a fantastic investment and will open up new perspectives. If you don't have a study Bible I highly recommend it as a Christmas present for yourself!

I think it is not only life-giving to listen to the Scriptures read at church, it is also life-giving to read them for ourselves at home... and ask questions about what we're reading. I think it's good to have an expectation that each time we read through a Bible passage – it might be a few verses, a chapter, or a whole letter - we'll learn something useful. In this we have an expectation that through the discipline of Bible reading God's Spirit will help us to spiritually grow & mature... and we're thankful for that lifelong journey.

The third possibility is to love the people we're with a little more than we currently do. Not just shake their hand warmly during the peace greeting at church, but get to share life with them between Sundays, and allow them to get to know us. Part of this is about being generous with our time and resources, recognising that Christ is present in whatever person we are spending time with.

Anglicans tend to think in threes, so I probably shouldn't offer any other possibilities. But, I do have a fourth possibility to quietly slip in when nobody is looking! I reckon John the Baptist did not limit himself to three points, instead he pushed on powerfully with a fourth, then a fifth, and a sixth...

So, here's my fourth possibility: that we be people of hope! As women and men we go through seasons in life, and some of these are really tough, but, in God's grace there is always hope. Even in congregations we can find ourselves in different seasons, but there is always a future filled with hope. Sometimes the way forward is not clear, and all we can

think of is the way things used to be, but we journey on into new seasons of being... and God is with us every step of the way.

Now my fifth and final possibility to consider... honestly this is my last one!

Let us be secure in the knowledge that God knows and loves each of us, and wants each of us to be part of the team making the world a better place. We may doubt our value and wonder if we have anything to contribute, but I think a recurring theme in the Gospel is that God wants each of us to be part of the 'team' in ministry and mission... For each of us have gifts, each of us have abilities... and each of us have a part to play.

Bearing these things in mind, would you please join me in prayer...

Holy God, we give thanks for the gift of our lives and the gift of your love. We give thanks for the opportunity to think about what we can do to grow healthier relationships with you, with ourselves, and with others. As we think about what needs to be given priority we pray for the guidance of your Spirit, and pray in the name of Christ. **Amen**