

Sunday 15 December 2024
The Third Sunday in Advent

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Zephaniah 3.14-20

NT: Philippians 4.4-7

Gp: Luke 3.7-18

You might have guessed from our first two readings today that this is 'Rejoice' Sunday. Gaudete! '*Rejoice in the Lord*', St Paul said, '*the Lord is near*'. Why should we rejoice? because God's life is a life full of joy in God's own outpouring of God's self to bring new life and a new creation at each and every moment. '*The Lord will rejoice over you with gladness; he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing*', the prophet Zephaniah tells us. We don't have to be anxious for tomorrow or that we may have messed up yesterday. But rejoice, for a new creation starts now. Here it is possible if it is our desire to hear John the Baptist's call and turn to God; something happens and through us it makes a difference to those around us.

This requires first that we acknowledge that life with all its complexity is a gift, and through that we come to see that we don't need to be slaves to our own obsessions and craving impulses. One of the great fallacies that people discuss in relation to '*the good life*' is the fallacy that when you know what to do, then you can do it: the key to virtue is knowledge. It does not take hard science to notice us that it does not work quite as straightforwardly as it sounds. Our talk about goodness has a very deep connection with our talk about perception. What we see shapes who we are. What do we see? And how do we see it? What is the range of our vision? What are the things that we allow to drop off the edge of our vision? How far do we see things in terms of ourselves and our agenda? Because so much that goes wrong with our experience, as John the Baptist reminds us today, has something to do either with what we train ourselves to ignore or what we insist on seeing simply exclusively in terms of our own needs and agendas.

Talking of '*seeing*', I don't myself in my house have a television; but occasionally when stuck in hotel rooms, I will go through the six hundred and ninety-seven channels provided to see if there is anything interesting on any of them. Often of course, there is not. But I was often intrigued by the '*discovery*' channel. You will remember that what you see there is mostly wild animals eating each other in a very dramatic way; it is a very popular television channel, together with cooking and wife-swapping. Be that as it may, discovery is close to the heart of John the Baptist's preaching today in preparation for the Lord's coming. Crowds come to him and ask, '*what should we do?*' Similarly, as we prepare for the coming of Christ, we need to remember that our health as a church depends on being a learning community, asking questions, not on being mindlessly pious, claiming to be '*children of Abraham*'. The poet W H Auden in his Christmas poem, *For the Time Being* said, '*To discover how to be human now is the reason we follow this star*'.

One way of discovering what it means to be human is asking what are the factors which encourage us to ignore aspects of our field of perception, in the way these tax collectors, soldiers and people who consider themselves to be religiously perfect did when they met with John the Baptist. That is about all of us. What are the factors that push us towards determining and constructing things around us simply in relation to our own agenda; for without some liberation from both, our lives continue to be shrunk, diminished, and damaged and therefore damaging to others.

In his book *Looking East at Winter*, Rowan Williams discusses the writings of various Church Fathers from 400-700 of the Christian era: a series of writers among the Church Fathers who produced tools of diagnosis for faulty seeing. The writers of this era were fascinated by the ways in which what they called our '*passions*' interfere with our perception. What they meant by '*passions*' are instincts that are not being thought through. An unthought instinct continually pulls us back within the framework of either ignoring or constructing our own terms.

One of these figures is someone called Evagrius, who distinguishes between diabolical knowledge and angelic knowledge of the world. Diabolical knowledge, we are reminded, is seeking to know what is there simply in terms of what immediately meets my needs. It absorbs what's outside into myself. Angelic knowledge is seeing what is there in relation to God, which also means seeing things as having dimensions that are utterly irrelevant to us. It is seeing that the world does not exist for me. Diabolical knowledge is seeing that the world is entirely orientated to myself. Predictably, human knowledge wobbles in between. What we need is a clear set of diagnostic tools to liberate us towards what looks like angelic knowledge.

Another one of these figures is a certain Mark the ascetic. He gives a vivid description of what goes wrong and how unexamined instinct, pure reactivity prevents us from a good life of joy; he says:

He who does not understand God's judgments walks on a ridge like a knife hedge and is easily unbalanced by every puff of wind. When praised, he exults; when criticised, he is bitter; when he feasts, he makes a pig of himself; when he suffers hardships, he moans and groans; when he understands he shows off; and when he does not understand, he pretends that he does; when rich, he is boastful, when in poverty he plays the hypocrite. Gorged, he grows brazen; and when he fasts, he becomes arrogant. He quarrels with those who reprove him and those who forgive him, he regards as fools.

This is a perfect fifth century description of a number of twenty first century public figures, including of course one's self. This is not so much evil doing as pathologized perception. The person who cannot see in front of themselves, like the tax collectors, the soldiers, or those

who call themselves *'children of Abraham'*, becomes locked into a selfhood constructed away from the human environment that might challenge and enlarge, and heal even. Where does joy come from? This is not an academic question. John the Baptist provided the straightforward answer: *'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise'. 'Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusations; be satisfied with your wages'.*

Attention, *'discovery'* is a way of pushing back against ignorance and fantasy.

Similarly, we need to ask whether the prosperity of the so-called developed world can expand indefinitely in light of our fragile world; or should we look at our security in terms of how we make each other safe, bringing justice and liberty to all people. We need at times to have John the Baptist's generous anger about the world's needs and there we might find our surest long-term security as we reach a situation where all are free to give and receive. But John the Baptist adds that this not about him; rather, *'one who is more powerful than I is coming'*; the birth life, death and resurrection of the one who is coming is the law of all life, the fire that has kindled all of our lives; a life so fragile but more powerful than we can imagine; a life that brings joy and rejoicing and yet is so costly, the life full of grace and truth. To those who receive him, as we have come to do so this morning, he will give the liberty to be kindled by his love; *'rejoice'*, but don't get too puffed up.

Fr Yazid Said