

## **Sermon at All saints Church Wokingham – 16<sup>th</sup> December 2018 “You brood of vipers”**

**By John Boylan, Authorised Lay Preacher**

**Reading: Luke 3. 7-18**

Are you ready for Christmas? How many times have you been asked that already. And how many people do you know who say “yes”?

Well, we are almost there. Yes, Christmas is just around the corner and impossible to ignore. There’s still so much to do, to get organised. But just for a moment, whilst we are all here in Church, we can at least afford a little time to consider the spiritual side of Christmas and in particular, Advent. We are already at the third Sunday of Advent and as we know, Advent like it’s big brother Lent, is supposed to be a time of penitential preparation and reflection. But how much of that have we had time for? It seems like only a few days ago that we had the Advent Carol Service. But to be honest, I always find it harder to focus during Advent than in Lent. I guess its because Christmas carries so much more social activity and organisation than Easter, even though it is the lesser of the two major Christian events. There is always so much to do to get ready for Christmas and the celebrations, whether forced through work or groups, or even self-imposed, seem to start earlier and earlier, certainly long before Christmas actually gets here.

But it’s still not too late to take a moment to pause and think about where we are in our lives. But even then, the temptation is to look forward, but if we are really going to review where we are, it’s not a bad idea to look back and work out where we are starting from. I think the words in the Evensong service provide a good prompt; have we “left undone the things we ought to have done and done the things we ought not to have done”? And it is along those lines that our reading today offers an insight into our behaviour that is often overlooked or skimmed over in our haste to get to the good bit about the coming of the Messiah.

But first a thought. I wonder how you would react if instead of asking if you were ready for Christmas, I had opened my sermon with the words “you brood of vipers”. I hasten to say that I’m not going to go there but it is nevertheless an interesting opener by John. Not sure it would go down too well today but in his context, it’s actually pretty standard apocalyptic rhetoric and the crowds desperate for something to take them out of their everyday struggle to live, would probably have been disappointed if they hadn’t been threatened with fierce warnings of judgement and punishment based on their individual and collective failures. There is a perverse desire in being harangued as well as a deeper rooted desire to be given something better to hope for. To John’s credit, he didn’t disappoint. But there is an urgency in his dialogue; something is going to happen soon. But alongside this hope there is desperation and John’s words strike at the heart of one of the central elements of Old Testament scripture, the generational covenant made by God with Abraham and continued through Isaac and Jacob to all their descendants. Here is John warning that the covenant (and remember that covenants were unbreakable), here he is telling them that God’s covenant with them was effectively meaningless unless they changed their ways. Its pretty blunt. They may claim the promise to Abraham as a birth rite but if they did not have Abraham’s faith then the promise does not apply. It’s a salutary announcement and he doesn’t mince words. Given the political and social environment, John was threatening their last hope of a better life.

It's a difficult because as we look at what he is saying, the parallels with our own lives are clearly visible. As Christians we are called to serve, but how much do we simply observe?

Throughout the Old Testament, the Jews have been shown to be fickle in their relationship with God. Nevertheless they retained the belief that their heritage was their ticket to salvation. They were after all the chosen people. John is basically saying that God will choose other people if they do not keep their side of the bargain. It sounds harsh but in many ways we need to consider how much we fall into the same mindset. Observing is much easier than serving.

Matthew's version goes down a different route, suggesting that John's warnings are aimed at the religious leaders, but the Luke version we heard today, clearly shows that John is addressing the whole crowd that has come to see him. Hence the words "you brood of vipers" is a generic and not targeted at individuals. Because it is aimed at everyone, we cannot therefore exclude ourselves from this generic criticism – if the cap fits, so to speak.

But then the mood changes and John offers everyone a way forward. Now initially I thought that maybe the crowd were playing along with John, sarcastically asking "okay then, tell us what we need to do". You know the sort of scenario; the prophet rants and raves, the crowd challenge him to tell them what they should do and then they ridicule or mock his answers before wandering off to carry on exactly as before. And indeed, his answers at first reading do seem a bit woolly and almost childlike, and open for ridicule. But stepping back and reading this more closely, the question "what can we do" is asked three times. Three times, first by the (presumably poor) crowd. Secondly by the tax collectors and then by the mercenary soldiers, both unpopular professions, outcasts on the fringes of society. And John's answers when considered, do not demand repentance and punishment. To the crowd he says "share". To the Tax Collectors he says, "don't cheat" and to the soldiers he says, "don't bully or misuse your power".

Yes, I know it all sounds pretty tame until you consider that John is offering them a realistic lifeline. He's not asking for radical conversions. He's not saying give up your job or lifestyle. He's actually saying that fidelity does not have to be heroic. We don't have to go out of our way to find opportunities to do God's will, to serve, to be Christ like, to be truly God's people. These opportunities are fashioned by our context, by the roles we accept and by the people with whom we come into contact and the needs they face. Luke's words make it clear that it is in our everyday lives, where these opportunities abound.

It's an interesting variance from Matthew. There is quite a lot of support for the idea that Luke was actually a gentile and certainly, his message does not appear to be focussed solely on the Jewish situation, comparing John the Baptist's or Jesus' teaching with the Jewish and religious leadership, the Scribes and Pharisees. He is more concerned with stressing that their message is applicable to everyone. No-one is excluded. Alexander Solzhenitsyn recognised this in a perceptive remark about human nature and singling out evil; "If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being". When Luke quotes Isaiah saying, "all flesh shall see the salvation of God" (Luke 3.6), he is not singling out any ethnic group; he is referring to all of us.

In between the dire warnings and the Messianic expectation, Luke has interposed ordinary, real life situations and opportunities to be Christ-like. I stress, that he does not ask people to change their lives, but to just be

aware of the needs of neighbours and do something about it. He does not demand pilgrimage or sacrifice. All he asks is for us to exercise the modicum of faith necessary to perceive God in our ordinary lives i.e. it is within the grasp of all of us to share, be fair and not exploit weakness.

And that to me is good news for us all and hopefully this will assist our reflection and preparation.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about Advent in 1943 describing it as:

*“A prison cell, in which one waits, hopes...and is completely dependent on the fact that the door of freedom has to be opened from the outside.”*

Luke’s words are a realistic and achievable way forward offering us all hope and a new chance to prove that we are ready for the door to be opened.

Finally, and as the Two Ronnies would say, “an item of late news just in”. I just wanted to share with you a news item that I think touches on our own 2020 project. Apparently, Donald Trump will not be attending a Church service this Christmas. When questioned about this he tweeted “Fake Pews”. Amen