

Sermon for Sunday 12 December 2021

John the Baptist

Zephaniah 3: 14 – 20; Philippians 4: 4 – 7; Luke 3: 7 – 18

A Clean Sweep

Well, it's been something of a wild week newswise, hasn't it? Certainly it's been wild for our Prime Minister; the arrival of a new baby in the same week as renewed allegations about payments for the refurbishment of his Downing Street flat; and revelations about what appear to be 2020's illegal Christmas parties amongst some of the civil servants downstairs in No 10. And then there is the omicron variant which has already prompted some increased Covid regulations – and more political controversy. And which makes all of our Christmas plans look a little less certain.

Further afield, there has also been some very wild weather in the US. Tornadoes have ripped through several southern states bringing devastation and death on a scale not known for

many years. Here in the UK the last people have not long been re-connected to the grid since storm Arwen a couple of weeks ago.

The world seems an uncertain place.

By contrast to all that I thoroughly enjoyed going down to the WS Community market on Saturday and doing some Christmas (and other) shopping. There were some very silly as well as some very lovely things on offer which exactly suited my mood. So I'm preparing for Christmas whatever happens.

Which leads me to ask – myself and all of us this question. Is our Christmas planning part of a refuge from reality? Or does it remind us of the deepest reality? Of what really matters amidst the ebb and flow around us?

We may not feel very comfortable being unable to plan for Christmas with certainty. But first century Judea was certainly not a comfortable place for most people. The puppet ruler, Herod, was generally hated, and the whole country was under Roman occupation. While Judaism was

tolerated as a safe national religion, any revolt would be savagely punished. Poverty and sickness were commonplace. People were counted and taxed not to provide education, health care and benefits as we are, but to fund the power of Rome and to establish how many men could be conscripted into the Roman army.

Into all of this bursts John the Baptist. Does He bring a message of comfort and hope? Well not exactly. He tells God's people they're a load of snakes. "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance!" (Luke 3: 7-8). And that to the people who have bothered to trek out to the desert and find him. People who want to listen to his message. John accepts no justifications or excuses. It makes no difference that they're God's special chosen people. Everyone needs to repent – to turn their lives around. He has some very practical suggestions too. Share, if you have more than enough. If your business is money don't make a bigger margin than you should. Don't use your power

to extort money from anyone with threats or false accusations. Be satisfied with your wages.

John was a powerful charismatic figure. Crowds flocked to hear him because of the drama of his presence and the power of his message. He must have known that people were wondering whether he might be the promised Messiah. His greatest temptation must have been to take power for himself. To enjoy his moment of glory. But he doesn't. He always points to the One who is to come. Listen to what he says in this modern translation –

"I'm baptizing you here in the river. The main character in this drama, to whom I'm a mere stage-hand, will ignite the kingdom life, a fire, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out. He's going to clean house – make a clean sweep of your lives. He'll place everything true in its proper place before God; everything false he'll put out with the trash to be burned."¹

¹ Luke 3: 16 – 17, *The Message* – Eugene Peterson, p144

In my head when I think about preparing for Christmas I'm always going to have a good clear out of my house. Get rid of the junk and make some space. It rarely happens! But perhaps that's why I love this picture – of our lives being like a house that needs clearing up and re-ordering – everything in its proper place before God. Everything that is not of God just dealt with and gone. Change from the inside out. That's what real repentance is.

Whatever is going on around us, whatever next week's news will bring, whether Christmas turns out as we have planned and hoped, we can still get our lives sorted to receive Jesus. That is the deepest reality of Christmas. All the rest may be fun, but it's superficial. With God's help we can let go of things that are not helpful – habits, thoughts, behaviours. We can turn our focus towards those things that are good and helpful and holy. To paraphrase our reading from Philippians "Rejoice in the Lord always...Let your gentleness be known to everyone. Do not worry about anything, but pray. And the peace of God

which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Amen *Revd Diana Young*