

Luke 3:7-18

(Note this shorter homily was due to the Nativity service taking place later)

John the Baptist is traditionally remembered on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Advent. It fits well with the greater Advent theme of the second coming and judgement. A few things to note.

John's own lifestyle and character give him the credibility to preach such a dramatic message. John was brought up within a Nazirite tradition which like other vocations is the adoption of a lifestyle as an act of dedication to God. No alcohol, celibacy, they didn't cut hair or beard.

More than these outward and personal attributes, John devoted himself in worship and a solitary existence. At morning prayer we have been reading about those considered to be the fathers of desert monasticism....but John the Baptist was there centuries before. The solitary existence and the depth of relationship with God that that can foster gave him credibility.

On quite a few occasions I've heard people tell me that something or someone "isn't Christian". The moment you put yourself in that place of judgement... you yourself become the focus of attention. Who are you to judge others? What gives you the right to say what is or isn't Christian. Jesus' instructions in Matthew 7 verses 1&2 could not be clearer. Do not judge or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others you too will be judged.

Only his calling, vocation and transparent lifestyle give John the authority to judge. The rest of us should be more cautious.

John's message is a message of repentance. He is speaking to his own people who casually believe that simply by being born into the

Israelite heritage (Abraham's children) they qualify for the eternal life. John warns very powerfully against the coming judgement but this will only be effective if the motivation is love.

That might seem an odd thing to say when John calls the crowd "you brood of vipers". He is certainly direct and uncompromising. But it's only because love longs to see those from his own people saved from the coming judgement. John has a very clear view that heaven is something to be gained and hell to be avoided.

Preaching hell-fire and damnation is not in vogue. Scaring the living daylight out of people concerning God's wrath doesn't seem to go with a declaration of his overwhelming love. But we should not let the pendulum swing so far over we neglect what is at stake.

No-one can soften or contradict Jesus' own words which include parables about being shut out, left out, sent to the place of weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. I haven't time today, but at some point I will explore with you a theology of heaven and hell and what the bible actually says. John is crystal clear. Heritage will not exempt you from judgment, repentance will.

Clearly his message of repentance struck through to the heart, crowds came to be baptised as an act of repentance. Note also that the instructions John gave to the crowds are only in response to the questions they ask. John demands that they "produce fruit in keeping with repentance" and the crowd ask him what it is they should do, and he tells them.

Finally, I admire John because he sought no popularity for himself for its own sake...but pointed the way to the coming Saviour. Much as I love the church, the church isn't the faith. Much as I love our wide extended community, belonging to it is not the faith. I value the impact our faith, hope and love can have in the lives of others, but if

our calling is to mean anything, it's to point to Christ, the light of the World. John would request I close with his own words....

<sup>1</sup>Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.

<sup>5</sup>Every valley shall be filled,  
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,  
and the crooked shall be made straight,  
and the rough ways made smooth;

<sup>6</sup>and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”