

New Shoot from Old Stump

a sermon preached on the

2nd Sunday in Advent

9 December 2007

at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by **Fr David Moore**

parish priest

Lections: Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12

John the Baptist is the expected religious figure. His behaviour is ascetic – camel's hair clothing, diet of locusts and honey. His language is fiery – calling people vipers, issuing threats.¹ His territory the desert, naturally – the voice of one calling in the wilderness.² John stands in the tradition of the prophet Amos, whose fiery words rattled the complacent, the wealthy and the self-righteous of the 8th century BCE. He is what many people expect of the religious preacher – fire and damnation, hard edges, certainties, black and white solutions, pulling the crowds. He articulates a 'common sense' religious viewpoint about humankind – we only do the right thing when threatened with a big stick. "Even now the axe is lying at the root of the tree; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."³ The religious voice, in the face of wanton disobedience, inevitably becomes more and more strident. This is basic anthropology, that tendency when things are not going our way to resort to methods which are essentially violent. Anyone who has been a parent understands this problem of rising frustration and temptations in the face of apparent disobedience. Every popular movement campaigning on law and order is motivated by something similar. The children of Israel have been in trouble so many times before, and this is hardly the first time that one of God's prophets has issued threats of divine indignation and wrath.

So John is a thoroughly familiar religious figure. It is not surprising, therefore, that when John begins to tell the people in the wilderness about the greater one who is coming after him he speaks in the terms of 'common sense' wisdom: "I baptise you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me... He will baptise you with Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."⁴ Can we hear the great thundering preacher? Frothing at the mouth against duplicitous Pharisees and Sadducees, who to be blunt have not come to the Jordan for repentance but only to check out John's 'orthodoxy', and out of fear of his popularity no doubt. Here is the same dramatic energy we can readily recognise in all of the church's preachers of fire and damnation. Here is the millenaralist predicting the end of the world. Here is the tele-evangelist frothing up the crowd. Here is the Archbishop of Sydney galvanising puritan religion in the Anglican Communion.⁵ The Galilee scene promises a dramatic and decisive showdown. The Jordan air no doubt bristled, like an electrostatically-charged humid atmosphere immediately prior to a thunderstorm. The baddies are about to get their comeuppance. The game is up. God is about to throw down the trump card of unquenchable fire!

But what happens next is one of the great jokes in the Bible. So accustomed are we to reading the Bible with pious expressions and pure thoughts that we possibly fail to notice its humour and its tricks. And this is one of the great biblical tricks. Here we have the great preacher delivering of his oracle to an enthusiastic crowd regarding the mighty one who is coming, but what actually happens next? Unfortunately the lectionary's limitations let us down at a critical moment, so I'm going to re-read those last few verses again to get us in the mood then keep reading the next few verses:

"I baptise you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me... He will baptise you with Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have

¹ Matthew 3:7

² Matthew 3:3

³ Matthew 3:10

⁴ Matthew 3:11-12

⁵ see for example "Ignore God's Wrath at Own Risk", Peter Jensen, 29 September 2006, Sydney Diocese Web Page, http://your.sydneyanglicans.net/senior_clergy/archbishop_jensen/articles/ignore_gods_wrath_at_own_risk_peter_jensen/

prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.' Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted"⁶

What a joke! John has been shouting at the top of his voice. He stops, and in the silence an inconspicuous carpenter appears. See how the rug is pulled completely from underneath John? Where is the winnowing fork? Where is the unquenchable fire? Where is the cataclysmic retribution of John's apocalyptic imagination? Exactly the opposite of what the Baptist has predicted. How stunned John must have been, stammering about how Jesus ought to be baptising him. Frothing John, Matthew tells us in glorious understatement with just one word, quietly and meekly shut up.⁷ What an embarrassment to have predicted threshing and fire! It is likely that John never fully came to terms with the fact that Jesus failed to live up to John's image of Messiah – which Matthew reveals in chapter 11 when from his prison cell John sends messengers to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to await another?"⁸ Jesus sends messengers back not with signs of threshing and fire: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them."⁹

So here is the dilemma for all religion. John's success was clearly substantial, sufficient to scare the living daylights out of the religious puritans from Jerusalem. However, John's conventional wisdom, whilst it has the capacity to draw crowds, *actually produces nothing new*. John's conventional religious wisdom envisages a static end point, an unquenchable fire. This is, in fact, primitive religion, the religious imagination of an infant stage of human development. Jesus' religious imagination, by contrast, has undergone development, is thoroughly dynamic – the blind are receiving their sight! This is the tremendous irruption into human history enfleshed in Jesus. This is the profound difference between the apocalyptic imagination and the eschatological imagination. Here is the new and living shoot which is rising up from the stump of Jesse.¹⁰ That is to say, this new thing is connected to the tradition, it arises from the tradition, but it is a new development, an evolutionary leap upwards in human consciousness.

Such irruption inevitably creates an unbearable tension – a tension in the history of humankind, equally, a tension within each and every individual soul. On Advent Sunday we are called to stay awake, to be on guard, for the new thing which God is doing. The symbol of Advent Two is the unbearable tension which is the inevitable consequence of the shoot rising from the stump – the conventional religious wisdom of John and the new religious breakthrough in Jesus. John represents the old dispensation, the old order, conventional religion which is tribal, violent and ultimately a dead end – John's call to repentance is needed, yet nothing new can come from John. Jesus is the new shoot, the new phylum of human development, who comes out of the old religious mindset but whose judgement is a shock.¹¹ He is intimately connected to the old stump, but represents the new evolutionary leap forward and upward in human consciousness – the master who brings out of his treasure, as Matthew writes, what is old and what is new.¹²

So Advent Two symbolises that we too are connected to the stump of Jesse – that is, the primitive religious dispensation - but that we are to be new shoots springing up, a new humanity. And like Jesus this means holding, often uncomfortably, what is old and what is new, in dynamic tension – the wolf shall lie with the lamb, the leopard lie down with the kid,¹³ not to replace the law, but to fulfil it¹⁴ - waiting with hope until the right time, when the holding of the opposites results in an entirely new position, a new consciousness. The symbol of Advent reminds us that Incarnation is not a historical commemoration. We are not a museum for stumps! We ourselves are called to be new shoots on an old stump, an evolving religious consciousness, bearers of the new humanity, living within the tension of the old and new treasures until the synthesis of the new creation. This vocation requires waiting in hope and expectation. Thus we pray in Advent: 'Marana tha! O Lord come!'

david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz

⁶ Matthew 3:13-17, 4:1

⁷ Matthew 3:15 The Greek word **αφήσιν** *aphēsin* means 'to leave alone', 'to release', 'to leave behind', 'to allow', and is from the same root word in the 'Lord's Prayer' and elsewhere which is translated into English as 'forgive'.

⁸ Matthew 11:3

⁹ Matthew 11:4-5

¹⁰ Isaiah 11:1

¹¹ Isaiah 11:3-4

¹² Matthew 14:52

¹³ Isaiah 1:6

¹⁴ Matthew 5:17-18