

GAUDETE SUNDAY**ADVENT III****ChCh-St. Luke's/Addington****16th December 2018**

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 3:7-18

Reflection

When we began our Advent journey two weeks ago, we were reminded of the perennial pilgrimage of the soul to which the Advent season invites us. Today, on this third Sunday of Advent, our gospel reading draws us to the banks of the Jordan River, a physical place where I happened to be standing five years ago, during my sabbatical. Let me set the scene as I experienced it...

No John the Baptizer this time, but there *were* armed soldiers – Israeli on one bank, Jordanian on the other, with the river itself forming the nations' border. On our bus-ride to this significant religious site (reopened following Papal request in 2011), the devastations of war were still obvious. Double wire fences on either side of the road carried signs warning of landmines. We drove past ruins – the ruins of a Roman Catholic church – with just one structure left intact: the baptismal fountain – a powerful symbol of hope in the conflict-ridden wilderness.

There *were* crowds gathered at Jordan's banks on that warm, hazy day – many pilgrims – men, women and children – queueing for baptism in the brown flowing waters; others, like myself, were committed to the *renewal* of our baptismal vows at this historic site.

It was a powerful experience – people gathered from the four corners of the earth – singing their praises to God, filled with joy and hope, even in the midst of the war-ravaged wilderness overseen by the military. On that 30th day of October, 2013, I think the presence of John the Baptist still lingered on the banks of the Jordan – his God-given call to repentance hung heavy in the air; and the call continues.....to the peoples of Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Syria...to the peoples of Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia. Bear fruits worthy of repentance, but don't try and do it on your own. Let God help!

Two thousand years ago, John the baptiser called the gathered people of Judea and beyond, to bear fruits worthy of repentance – to face themselves and prepare for the nearness of God

– the coming Messiah. Some had come to him out of curiosity, others out of a genuine desire for change. There were tax collectors and soldiers among the crowds.

He called *them* to turn away from comfortable complacency & corruption, and toward the core of their vulnerable being, where they would truly meet God. John himself had gone through this in the wilderness.

And we know that after Jesus' baptism by John, he too faced a wilderness time – a Spirit-led opportunity to face himself through times of temptation and testing. The people's response to John was to ask of him: '*What then, should we do?*' And John's reply was different for each group, depending on their status (and their own temptations and weaknesses) – those with resources were to share them; the unpopular tax collectors were to charge only what was fair – to turn away from exploitation; the soldiers were to avoid corrupt practise and be satisfied with their wages.

John exhorted them to examine their lives, strip away all that threatened to separate them from God, as they awaited the coming Messiah, and live fruitful lives of compassion and economic justice. John shone a spotlight into the darkest corners of each soul present:

- Do you have more than enough to eat? More clothing than is necessary? Then share what you have with those who don't.
- are you tempted by financial greed and power over others? Act justly and with compassion.
- Is your fragile and ever-hungry ego fed by abusing others? Learn to be content with what you have. **God loves you. It is enough.**

The light of truth was *so* piercing that people wondered whether John was in fact, the promised Messiah. But he was quick to shine that light beyond himself, to the coming source of Truth – the one who would baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

God's call to us to face ourselves is not a call to fear of judgement. Fear of judgement can be paralysing, bringing shame and embarrassment. God calls us to turn inward, in trust and honesty, open to recognising what we need to let go of and to see where we can grow more deeply into fullness of life. As one commentator wrote: 'It is wrong to call people to repentance in a context of judgement, condemnation and fear. It is often the prodigal son

remembering his father's house, the shepherd *searching* for the sheep, the look on the face of Christ when *Peter* had denied him, which break the heart and work the miracle.'

In Paul's letter to the Philippians, written while in prison, he writes: *Rejoice the Lord is near....do not worry about anything.* "It is wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the centre of your life." Our baptism with fire and the Holy Spirit empowers and refines *us*, for life in Christ. Christ becomes our centre. What if the clearing of the threshing floor, described in our gospel reading, is an opportunity to let go of all that no longer fits us for God's purposes? What if the winnowing fork is a tool of love? We needn't fear submitting ourselves to God's refining. We do not face our vulnerabilities on our own.

I had to face my own vulnerability, and some shame and embarrassment a few Advents ago, but in the fiery refining process, discovered the nearness of God and the joy of repentance. It was like this...

Late one Friday night, I found myself taking a frantic journey to a smoke-filled church. There I discovered the charred remains of an Advent wreath, blackened table and singed carpet. I had to face myself and my fallibility, having, earlier that day – left a candle burning in the wreath.

And yet, that place of vulnerability was where I met God – in honest, heartfelt prayer and in the love, care and forgiveness of my parish community (and my bishop!). I was given a cloak of humility. I let go of pride and received deep compassion. And there was another positive outcome – two parishioners had recently endured kitchen fires that had left them feeling rather sheepish, so there was a certain delight and relief in the knowledge that their Vicar was at *least* – if not *more* – accident prone than they were! No wonder my parting gifts on leaving the parish included a rose called Red Flame and a shrub called Little Flick!

That episode – more of a baptism of fire than of water – brought me in my vulnerability to the same question as those on the banks of the Jordan River two thousand years ago: '*What then, should I do?*'

Tuning in to the daily news, we are only too aware of the need to face ourselves – as individuals, communities and nations – and to repent – to turn, change and be all-attentive to the nearness of God in our midst. Candle-lit vigils across the country this past week have

expressed this, as have changes to our laws with regard to strangulation. This year's Christian World Service Christmas Appeal - *Be the Lifeline* – gives us the opportunity to respond in a practical way beyond ourselves, so that *all* people have food, water, dignity and lives free of violence. Compassion and economic justice are as important today as they were two thousand-plus years ago.

Today, on Gaudete Sunday, I ask the same question: *'What then, should I do?'* So, recalling my visit to the banks of the Jordan five years ago, I wear a bracelet, and display a stole. The bracelet was purchased from a young Palestinian boy in the tension-filled town of Hebron (home to the tombs of the patriarchs and matriarchs of our faith). The stole hanging here was handmade by Palestinian women in Gaza. Today I remember them, together with the soldiers on the banks of the Jordan River. I pray that they would all have a hope for their future and the capacity to experience joy.

What is the prayer of your heart this Gaudete Sunday? Perhaps Paul's words to the Philippians can encourage us.....

"Rejoice in the Lord always! And again I will say, Rejoice! Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

In the name of God, Creating, Redeeming and Life-Giving.

Amen.

Helen Roud