

Sermon - John the refiner

Based on: Malachi 3.1-4; Luke 1.68-79 (The Song of Zechariah); Philipians 1.1-11; Luke 3.1-6

Anticipation

- As we prepare ourselves once again for the celebration of God entering into his own creation, by being born as one of us, we are invited to engage with various Scripture readings that speak to us of anticipation.
- Not only of anticipating God being present with us as a new-born infant, but also of anticipating the Spirit of God being manifestly present in the adult Jesus.
- This dual anticipation is appropriate, because the story of the baby Jesus is only relevant for us as a consequence of what the adult Jesus then went on to do.
- Matthew and Luke's gospel accounts both have two chapters each of the infancy narratives.
- And then all four of the gospel accounts introduce John the Baptist at the start of the narrative of the three years of Jesus' ministry.
- John's vocation and message provide an important link between the prophets and prophecies of the Old Testament and that of Jesus the Christ of the New Testament.
- John's father, the priest Zechariah, is filled with the Holy Spirit at John's birth, and sings out his hymn of praise, which we have recited in place of the psalm today.
- This is called The Song of Zechariah, or Benedictus - being the first word of the Latin version.
- John's mother Elizabeth and Jesus' mother Mary were cousins, and both their pregnancies were regarded as miraculous - Elizabeth's because she was thought to have passed the age of child-bearing, and Mary's because she had not yet been with a man.
- In the last verse of Luke chapter 1, it states that John *grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel. (Luke 1.80)*
- Likewise, in the last verse of Luke chapter 2, it states that *Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in divine and human favour. (Luke 2.52)*

Located in history

- And so we come to today's gospel passage, from the start of chapter 3, where Luke provides the historic context - much like he does for the birth of Jesus.
- In both instances, Luke names who the Roman Emperor is, and who the local governor is - and then adds further names of people in positions of power
- - not only the secular power of the Romans along with Jews as puppet authorities under them, but also those of religious power: the high priest Annas, and his son-in-law Caiaphas, who was a successor to Annas, even while Annas was still alive and very influential.
- These high priests were in positions of religious power, but it is telling that under the Roman occupation they were political appointments, made by the Roman authorities.
- Scholars suggest that there are two reasons as to why Luke makes mention of who was in power at the time that Jesus was born, and then again when John the Baptist anticipates the baptism of Jesus.
- The first reason is to locate the life and events of Jesus in history.
- While there are certainly mythological aspects to the infancy narrative, Luke makes sure that we understand that the gospel story is real, and is grounded in the experienced reality of that place and time.
- The second reason for naming the secular powers, especially Pilate, Herod, Annas and Caiaphas, is that these are the authorities who persecute Jesus, the Son of God.
- And are then seen to have their wilful selfish destructive agendas ultimately thwarted by divine power - thwarted by the willing compassionate agenda of God's sacrificial love, enacted through Jesus.

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Sin, forgiveness, repentance, baptism

- I am going to touch on the first reason a little more closely - that of ensuring we recognise the gospel story as being grounded in reality.
- This is exactly what John the Baptist focuses on in his message.
- Next Sunday we'll be hearing his words in detail, but for now it is sufficient to have the theme of his proclamation described:

He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Luke 3.3)

- John was focused on the reality of sin - the reality of the fact that people had behaved - and were behaving - in a way that damaged their relationships with God and with others.
- In effect he was firstly proclaiming: Listen up people, your sin is real, and it's time you recognised this and acknowledged it.
- Which sounds discomfoting and not what people want to hear: people don't want to be told that they are sinners.
- However, this was only part of the message, because he was also stating, in effect: And you can be forgiven!
- Not simply that people are sinners, but that people are sinners *and* forgiveness is available.
- That is, each person's relationship with God is damaged, and it can be restored.
- Furthermore, John was saying that this restoration could be achieved by repenting - by acknowledging the reality of sin damaging our relationship with God, and turning away from our own wilful selfish desire that causes sin.
- And finally, John was offering a tangible way of demonstrating - to ourselves and to others - that decision to turn from our sin and seek forgiveness.
- John offered a baptism - a symbolic act of being washed clean in water - to be an outward sign of our repentance of the sin that damages, and the receiving of forgiveness - that is, the restoration of relationship with God.
- This is exactly what his priest father Zechariah was singing about, when he sang:

*And you, child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High:
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way,
To give his people knowledge of salvation:
by the forgiveness of their sins. (Luke 1.76-77)*

Refined and purified

- Luke then quotes the passage from Isaiah, about the way being made straight and smooth, with the difficulties presented by steep mountains and valleys being removed, so that the way *to* God - and the way *of* God - becomes straightforward.
- This is John's role, to prepare people so that they will be able to recognise God at work in the teaching, and the ministry, and the life of Jesus.
- The prophet Malachi also speaks in a way that we now recognise as foretelling of John the Baptist:
See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me ... (Malachi 3.1)
- But also warns that John will make people uncomfortable with his direct words.
For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver (Malachi 3.2-3)
- Being pure is desirable, but the process of purification involves fire and change.
- Purifying silver or gold requires heating up the metal to the point that it changes from a solid to a liquid.

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- The impurities in the metal float to the top where they can be skimmed off, so that what is left is pure silver or pure gold.
- This is a potent metaphor for the process of having one's sinful damaging behaviours and attitudes refined out of oneself.
- It involves the fire of the Spirit that is discomfoting, as we are confronted with the reality of where we go off-track from walking in the way of the Lord.
- However, allowing ourselves to be subjected to the fire of the Holy Spirit, and allowing ourselves to be transformed, then allows for the dross of impurities to be removed.
- As a side note, this removal of impurities is exactly what fullers soap - or fullers earth - does.
- Fullers earth is a type of dry clay in the form of powder, which was traditionally used to remove lanolin and other greasy impurities from woollen cloth.
- Returning to the metaphor of being purified and refined like gold and silver, Malachi continues that the those who are purified will then be able to:

present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years. (Malachi 3.3-4)
- The whole point of the process of having the impurity of sin removed through acknowledgement, repentance, and forgiveness, is that we are then made right-wise, and rightly aligned with God's will and desire.

Producing the harvest of right-wiseness

- So as we journey through the season of Advent, we are reminded by God's Word of the need to once again prepare ourselves to celebrate the coming of Christ.
- Part of this preparation is to listen to the message of John the Baptist, both today and next Sunday, and to hear his words as applying to each of us, individually.
- You are invited to acknowledge the sin in your own life - those aspects where you are following your own will and not God's will.
- But not simply to feel judged, or guilty, or bad - but to be able to see where you are in need of the forgiveness that is offered.
- As Christians who are already baptised, we don't need to be baptised again - but we can claim the baptism, or the confirmation of that baptism, that we have already undergone, and intentionally repent by turning back to God - and intentionally accept the forgiveness that is always offered to us.
- In conclusion, when we undertake this preparation, the words of Paul from his letter to the Philippians then apply.
- Paul wrote:

And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God. (Philippians 1.9-11)