

Sermon - Burning the chaff

Based on: *Philippians 4.4-7; Luke 3.7-18*

Some humour

- I don't usually include jokes in my sermons - but there's an old one that always amuses me, which is based on the Epistle reading.
- The minister was shaking hands with his parishioners at the end of the service, and his regular critic was next in line.
- "So, Bill - what did you think of today's sermon?" he asked, warily.
- "Ah, Vicar," said Bill. "It was like the peace of God."
- Unable to believe that he was going to receive a compliment from Bill for the first time, he asked, delightedly, "Really!!! And how was it like the peace of God?"
- Bill waved his hand dismissively: "It passed all understanding."

[The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding. (Philippians 4.6)]

Summary - good news?

- I won't even attempt to link that with today's gospel passage, which contains some odd contrasts.
- The first paragraph has John insulting and berating the crowds who flock to hear him.
- In the second paragraph he answers their questions considerately.
- In the third he describes the Messiah - the one anointed by God - as coming with fire to burn away everything that is worthless.
- And finally this passage ends by stating:

So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. (Luke 3.18)

- We can summarise John's words as:
 - You people are a bunch of snakes!
 - Do only what is right!
 - The Messiah will baptise you with fire, and the chaff will be burnt up!
- And Luke ends by describing this as good news?!
- Well - let's look at each paragraph in a bit more detail.

The wrath of God

- Firstly, John says that some unspecified 'wrath' will be visited upon them.
- It's assumed that this will be God's wrath - righteous wrath for what the Roman oppressors have perpetrated, in making the holy city of Jerusalem and the whole nation of Judea ritually unclean - and thus unworthy as a whole to stand before God.
- Even the position of the high-priest was a political rather than a divine appointment, and the Jewish rulers were recognised as collaborators with the Gentile oppressors.
- The expectation was that God would anoint someone - a Messiah - who would act like a divine superhero, and clear away all the baddies, so that God's people could once more live in accordance with God's law.
- So maybe John's confirmation that the day of divine wrath was on its way felt like really good news to many in the crowd looking forward to that day of God's wrath.
- But John reckons that they are the ones who are fleeing in anticipation of that day.
- This would immediately have been a puzzler for them.
- I suggest that many in the crowd would have thought: Hang on a moment, mate! The wrath is not meant for us - it's meant for the Romans and their puppets. We're the good ones here.
- Perhaps John guessed their thoughts, because he then challenges them:

Do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"

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- That is: do not assume that your heritage puts you in the right.
- It doesn't matter if you can trace your genealogy directly back to Moses, or even Abraham - that entitles you to nothing!
- If God decides to create a new people of God for himself, then he will do so, and your presumed entitlement will be worthless.
- In fact - John continues - God's wrath will be like an axe that is ready to be wielded against any tree that does not bear good fruit.
- And then he makes his first mention of fire:
'every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.'

Repentance fruit

- This also introduces the other metaphor that John uses: that of bearing good fruit.
- He describes these as *'fruits worthy of repentance.'*
- It is good to be reminded of what repentance is.
- Sometimes repentance is confused with confessing sin and asking for forgiveness.
- Repentance is rightly associated with confession and forgiveness, but in itself it does not mean that.
- Rather, repentance is the act of turning - turning from going one's own way to following God's way.
- Repentance and penitence are similar words.
- To be penitent is to regret having followed a particular course of action, and to wish that one had made a different decision.
- So to repent is to turn from those bad decisions, from the path of unright-wise choices.
- John calls on people to give evidence that they have turned from their own way to following God's way - that is, that they bear fruit by manifesting the beneficial consequences of complying with God's law of love.
- When there is evidence of such blessing in their lives, then they will be able to rejoice rather than regret.
- Luke then describes some of the examples of the kind of behaviour that will reveal such good fruit.
- It is interesting to hear of the variety of people who come to hear John, because these include some of the oppressors themselves - some Roman soldiers, and also some of the Jewish collaborators - some tax-collectors.
- John provides simple examples of right-wise behaviour:
 - if you have more than enough for yourself, then share with those who don't have enough;
 - do your job with integrity, without taking advantage of others; and
 - be satisfied with your wage - that is, don't claim what belongs to others.

The winnowing-fork

- The crowds are so impressed with John's charisma, his no-nonsense direct approach, and his own integrity, that they wonder if he is the one who might be the one anointed by God, to initiate God's day of wrath.
- Luke describes John as being clear in his own mind that being the Messiah is not God's vocation for himself.
- He, John, is not the one to initiate the day of wrath.
- His role is one of turning people back to God, by offering them a water baptism of repentance.
- He recognises that the one who is to be anointed by God will bring a baptism of fire.
- And John provides a metaphor that an agricultural community would have been very familiar with.
- Harvested wheat would be laid out on the threshing floor - a smooth hard surface - and an ox or donkey would be guided to tramp around on it to break up the ears of wheat.

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- After that the farmer would wait for a breezy day, or perhaps get a big hand-turned fan going, and then, using a winnowing fork, scoop up the broken ears and throw them into the air.
- The light chaff would blow off to one side while the heavy grain would fall straight down again.
- After repeating this for long enough, there would only be the grain left in a pile, while the chaff would have accumulated as a drift to one side.
- The easiest way to dispose of the chaff would simply be to set a flame to it, and it would flare up, burn bright and hot for a short time, and just leave some light ash behind.
- So John uses this metaphor as a way of describing how the Messiah would be coming with the fire of the Spirit, burning up all that was worthless and unfruitful, and leaving behind just the fruit of the wheat - that is, the grain itself, which was what had the real worth and value.

The good news of fire

- Luke describes this as good news.
- Good news for whom?
- Good news for those who have undergone a baptism of repentance, and who are determined to follow God's way, and to be right-wise in how they live their lives.
- Good news for those who are striving to bear good fruit, and who want to do deeds that have the weight of worth.
- Nevertheless, even for these people, it wouldn't surprise me if there was some nervousness around the idea of being subjected to a winnowing.
- If the Messiah stepped into your life right now, with his winnowing-fork in his hand, and scooped up every aspect of your life, and every aspect of how you live right now, and tossed it into the air - what would be the weighty worthwhile stuff that would drop straight down?
- And what would be the light worthless stuff that would blow off to one side?
- Don't fool yourself: each one of us has chaff in our lives - those aspects of who we are and how we conduct ourselves that is not worthy of the Lord.
- The question is: are we prepared to allow the Lord to winnow us?
- Do we step forward and say: 'Lord, separate what is worthy in me from what is worthless, and burn away the chaff'?
- Would we regard that as being good news for ourselves?
- Of course, being subjected to the fire of the Spirit is not comfortable.
- However, if we do so, the consequence is that what is left is of value, because it is that which nourishes - both ourselves, and others.

The irony of expectations

- The irony of the expectations of the crowds is that they presumably expected the day of wrath to be visited upon their enemies.
- John the Baptist turns that thinking around - his implication is that God's wrath will instead be visited upon the enemy that is within each of us.
- Indeed, our collect for today refers to the '*evil that clings to what is good*'.
- The irony of the presumption of the crowd is that they thought their heritage made them the people of God.
- John turns that thinking around - it is not their heritage, but their fruits of repentance, their willingness to endure the coming baptism of fire and have their chaff burnt away.
- This message is also for us today, during the Advent season, as we examine our faith relationship with God, and attend to where it is weak or failing.

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- But while we do so, let us also take Paul's words to heart, and be encouraged by them:
Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ... Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

- I will end this sermon by praying the collect again:
Almighty God,
you sent your Son into a world
where the wheat must be winnowed from the chaff
and evil clings even to what is good:
let the fire of your Spirit purge us of all corruption,
so that, purified, we may wait eagerly for him
whose coming is certain, whose Day draws near,
your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. **Amen.**