

St Botolph's Church Worthing
4 December 2016
Reverend Roger Walker
Matthew 3: 1-12

We all know that the season of Advent – the word means coming – is reminding us of the prophesied second coming of Jesus to judge the living and the dead. So why do we hear about John the Baptist announcing that God's prophecy of the first coming of Jesus has been fulfilled and is about to come to fruition? There are probably two reasons – the first is to show us that God's prophecies were fulfilled the first time around and so we can have very confidence that his later prophecies given through Jesus will be fulfilled and that Jesus will come again.

Secondly the things that John the Baptist was asking of God's people as they prepared for his Son – the Christ – to be manifested to them are very much the same as the things that we are called to as we wait for Jesus' second coming. John preached to people that they should repent and confess their sins to produce 'fruit in keeping with repentance'. It's not enough, when we have sinned, just to say 'sorry' to God. We have to turn away from sin and go a new and better way - the literal meaning of repentance - and this will include, where possible putting right the damage our sin has done. This all sounds fairly gentle, but John's preaching was anything but gentle. He calls the Jewish leaders who have come to him 'a brood of vipers'.

He chides the people for thinking that everything will be all right because they are descendants of God's great servant Abraham. And he says 'the axe is already at the root of the tree and every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire'. The fruit, of course, is the 'fruit in keeping with repentance'. That's all pretty hefty stuff but worse is to come: 'one more powerful than John - the Christ himself - is coming, and he will baptise them not with water- as John did. - but with the Holy Spirit and with fire. And here comes the judgement bit which links John's teaching to Jesus' Second Coming - he will clear his threshing floor, gathering the wheat into his barn. But burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire: lost of metaphors there, but the meaning is clear. Those who are listening to John must decide: are they wheat to be saved or chaff to be burned?

Today's Reading gives us just the same challenge: wheat or chaff? We all like to think that we are definitely wheat, but let's have a look at our lives through the eyes of John the Baptist and Jesus. John is looking for repentance of sins, for an acknowledgement of our sins before God, seeking his forgiveness and a changed life that shows good fruit to all around us. Now, can we honestly say we have acknowledged all our sins before God? Or have we been fooled enough to think that we can hide some of our sins from God who sees all the secrets of our hearts? I suspect we have, and when repenting and turning from our sin have we really set out on a new way that honours God and reflects his love and purposes to those we meet? Again, I suspect our repentance and the fruits of our repentance will leave a bit to be desired.

I think John might have been calling us a brood of vipers and be starting to swing his axe towards the base of our tree. As, during Advent, we imagine ourselves standing before the judgement seat of Christ we can be very daunted. We know all the imperfections of our lives that will be revealed - and we can see clearly the winnowing fork tossing us with all the other chaff into the unquenchable fire. It's very discouraging because we know we are human and that, for all the efforts we make at confession and repentance, there will still be failings. We need some help, and it's not the threat of unquenchable fire, but Jesus is also going to baptise us with the Holy Spirit.

Let's remember what the Holy Spirit does: he is the counsellor - literally the one who stands beside us to make us strong. That's what we want: help, not threats: and Jesus promises she teaching about prayer in Luke 11 that 'your Father in heaven will give the Holy Spirit on those who ask him'. Here's a whole new look to John's teaching - we can listen to him and feel overwhelmed if we think that we have to match up to everything in our own strength. But our Christian lives are not just about the way we live in the world. They are also about our relationship in prayer with Jesus and with God our Father. So God is saying to us through the preaching of John the Baptist 'read the

scriptures and all they teach us about living in God's Kingdom'. But know that what is more important to us, and does lead us ever closer to Kingdom living, is our life of prayer and the strength of the Holy Spirit which God will give in answer to that prayer.

AMEN

4.12.16