

Third Sunday of Advent, Year C

Luke 3:7-18

Zephaniah 3:14-end; Philippians 4:4-7

What's the point of going on holiday somewhere? Well, amongst other things, the idea is to get away from the humdrum of daily life, to take time out to 're-charge our batteries' and to come back from it all well and truly refreshed, ready to get back to normal life with a sense of renewed vigour. Well, that's the theory, at least! In reality, though, the afterglow from the holiday might linger around for a while, but it eventually fades away, and we start to look forward to when we can have our *next* break. So, when it comes to taking holidays, one question which arises is, 'To what extent have we really been *transformed* by our holiday experience?' Because, so often, holidays fail to have any real lasting impact upon our daily lives.

Now that issue of *transformation* is very much at the forefront of what we could call 'part 2' of Luke's account of the ministry of John the Baptist (more

about that in a moment, though). As we noted last week, John's main role was to *prepare* the way for the coming of Christ. John himself was a seemingly unassuming character and his lifestyle was somewhat unconventional – he was perhaps not the most obvious person folk would turn to if they were wanting to find out about religious matters. Yet John *was* attracting a *lot* of attention – people were venturing out into the wilderness in their droves to see this guy. And, above all, it was John's *message* – what he was actually proclaiming – that caught the attention of the masses. John had something new and radical to say – he was, after all, the first great prophet to emerge after such a long time. And John's message was one of repentance – calling people to turn back to God. It was a message which was similar, in many ways, to that of the various prophets in the Old Testament, but this time it was all the more urgent as it was now being preached in anticipation of the coming of God himself among his people. And John was certainly not one to 'mince his words' as he addresses those coming to him, "You brood of vipers!" It's strong language which perhaps

doesn't sit easily with our polite Anglican culture. But it *does* serve to emphasise once again the fact that sin needs to be taken very seriously. In fact, far from putting people off, they were actually taking heed of John's message, understanding the depth of their sin and resolving to turn back to God. It's significant that today, in this country and around the world, the churches which are growing fastest tend to be those which are clear about sin and our need to repent, and the ones that are dwindling are those which tend to 'water down' the seriousness of sin.

In fact, there *is* here a strong emphasis upon the theme of judgement. Because when Christ comes again in glory, he will *judge* the living and the dead – as John declares, “every tree.....that does not bear good fruit [will be] cut down and thrown into the fire”, “the chaff [will be burnt] with unquenchable fire”. So, there is an urgent need for people to turn back to the Lord in readiness for his judgement. Now we might think that the concept of judgement is somehow unfair. But judgement is integral to the gospel, for ultimately there is no good news if evil is

not going to be decisively overthrown. We can get so used to the image of 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild', but let's not lose sight of the fact that Christ will come again as *judge* of all people.

So those who were responding positively to John's message were being baptised – an outward sign of an inner resolve to turn back to God. Now although we naturally tend to associate John with the practice of baptism, it's rather significant that he was actually baptising people at all. For the fact is that baptism was only normally reserved for those Gentiles (non-Jews) who wanted to convert to Judaism; the people of Israel themselves assumed that they didn't need it – as God's chosen people, they presumed they were already in a right relationship with God. But John reminded them that this was certainly not the case – “Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’”, he says to them; appealing to one's ancestry simply isn't good enough. Rather, each *individual*, Jew and Gentile alike, had to make a decision to turn to the Lord.

And the same applies to *us* today. Just because we might come from a family with a strong Christian heritage, or even have ministers, priests, bishops or preachers in our ancestry, is neither 'here nor there' when it comes to God's offer of salvation in Christ. The truth is that each *individual* needs to make that decision to repent – to turn to the Lord Jesus Christ, confessing our sins, receiving his forgiveness and cleansing, and walking in the power of the Holy Spirit. For ultimately, we stand before God as individuals. And God does indeed want us to turn to him and be saved. In our Old Testament reading from the prophet Zephaniah, God promises to restore the people of Israel after the judgements that have fallen upon them. God is in the business of restoration – restoring broken lives. And so now he is coming to dwell in the midst of his people in the person of his Son – restoring what was lost, bringing forgiveness and cleansing of sin, through Christ's sacrifice made once for all upon the Cross and his resurrection from the dead.

Now returning to John the Baptist's ministry, we read that once people had confessed their sins and been baptised, that wasn't simply the end of the matter – far from it. And this is where we come back to that theme of *transformation*. As John forcefully points out, repentance needs to find expression in a radically transformed lifestyle. In fact, just as we're considering today part 2 of John the Baptist's ministry, as it were, we're also, in a sense, focusing this morning on part 2 of the process of *repentance*. Repentance involves confessing our sins and receiving God's forgiveness. But it doesn't end *there*. Repentance must lead to a changed life. If we have received God's forgiveness and have resolved to walk from then on in *his* ways, then we simply cannot carry on living as we did before. "Bear fruits worthy of repentance", John declares – there's no use getting baptised and then simply going back to one's old ways. So John gives some practical advice to people as to what a transformed lifestyle should look like. To folk generally he emphasised their need to be more generous and willing to share what they have with others; to the tax collectors he says that

their corrupt practices needed to cease (remember that tax collectors at the time were very shady characters, rather different to our HM Revenue & Customs) – so honesty is the order of the day; and to soldiers John says that they needed to put an end to their practice of threatening people in order to extort money out of them. All of these different folk were taking time out of their daily routine to venture into the wilderness to encounter John the Baptist and to hear his message, but they were being encouraged to return to their daily business as *transformed* individuals.

And the same holds true for *us* today. If we have received Christ's forgiveness and cleansing in *our* lives, then we need to remember that it's absolutely vital that this leads to a changed lifestyle. The Christian life is *not* something static ('I've committed my life to Christ and that's it....'), but rather it involves a constant, ongoing growth in holiness and righteousness – it's about walking in the power of the Holy Spirit – in obedience to God. No longer doing it '*my way*', but *God's way*.

And we are called to live out this holy life within the context of our *day-to-day lives*. Notice that when John was advising people as to how they should be behaving as a consequence of having repented and been baptised, he wasn't telling them to give up their occupations and to come and join him out in the wilderness in order to live an ascetic lifestyle, totally given over to spiritual contemplation. No – they might have come *out* into the wilderness to seek after God, but now they had to *go back* to where they came from as *changed* people, and in *those* various situations to live a godly life. *This* is the real test of the genuineness of our repentance – *this* is where it all gets really challenging. It's one thing to be at church on a Sunday morning declaring God's praises, but what are we like on Monday morning, or Wednesday morning, or Friday afternoon? Does the way we live our lives from Monday to Saturday truly reflect our commitment to Christ? Are we demonstrating some of those fruits of a transformed heart and mind which the Apostle Paul mentions in our reading from Philippians, namely gentleness,

godly joy, thankfulness, and God's peace which surpasses all understanding? Now this might all seem a rather tall order. But remember that we do this *not* in our *own* strength, but in the power of the Holy Spirit; because those who commit their lives to him and are seeking to follow in his way, are baptised by Christ with the *Spirit*. As John declares, "He [Jesus] will baptise you with/in the Holy Spirit and fire."

So, *our* trips away on holiday might not generally have much lasting impact on our lives. But rather more importantly, does the forgiveness and cleansing of our sin we receive from Jesus have a lasting impact upon our daily lives in the form of a radically *transformed* life? *We* are called to "Bear fruits worthy of repentance." So, what might this look like for each of us?

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, we give you thanks that, through your Son, we can know the forgiveness of our sins as we turn to you in penitence and faith. Lord, may we not simply leave it at that, but rather, by the power of your Spirit, may we truly seek to serve you in *newness* of life to the glory of your name. Amen.