

Advent 3 - Prepare the Way

Last Sunday, a King was crowned. Harry Redknapp, football manager, was crowned King of the Jungle 2018 in the final of *'I'm a Celebrity, Get me out of Here.'* It's not a programme I watch, but I'm aware that contestants have to go through arduous trials such as impossible obstacle courses, eating disgusting food such as a goat's eye, beach worms, a dead water spider and fermented duck egg, and having your head locked into a Perspex sphere while a helpful ranger pours in a kilogram of giant mealworm and 2000 live crickets. Harry Redknapp had been the favourite to win and secured almost 70% of the public vote on the night. I'm not sure *what* he won, other than the title, but he looked a happy, if not relieved, man on being crowned the winner.

Deserts, I imagine, are equally inhospitable places to jungles, which is where we find ourselves in today's gospel reading. Both are places of vulnerability, where the comforts and security of normal life are gone, and where it's difficult to hide from your real self.

Matthew's gospel tells us that John came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, "*Repent, for the kingdom*

of heaven is near." His clothes were made of camel's hair, his food was locusts, not dissimilar to a bush tucker trial, and wild honey. But, however strange this man looked and sounded, people flocked to him in droves. Again, it's Matthew's account that tells us that *'people went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan'*. And they responded to his message: *'Confessing their sins, they were baptised by him in the Jordan River'* we read. But, to reach the Jordan, it's necessary to cross the desert. An arduous journey. By the time the Jordan has been reached, the desert, with all its challenges, has been crossed. People stepping out of their comfort zones to be more accessible to God. Entering a difficult place, overcoming fears and having to find strength they didn't know they possessed. By the time they arrived, they'd already accomplished much, and a committed change might already have been made in responding to John's call.

And how does John greet them when they finally arrive? How does our passage today from Luke's gospel begin, *'You brood of vipers!'* 'Sorry, excuse me, but did I hear you right? I've just travelled for days through hostile desert territory. It's been hard, but I hoped it would be

worth it, and you greet me with name-calling me ‘viper’?
Did I hear you right, John the Baptist man?’

But John doesn’t pull any punches. *‘Who told you to escape from the coming anger?’* he confronts the crowds. *‘You’d better prove your repentance by bearing the proper fruit!’* Rather reminds me of a child being warned not to say sorry if they’re simply going to repeat the misdemeanour a moment later. You’re not really sorry unless something then changes. *‘And don’t get comfortable and presume on your religious status as Children of Abraham either,’* he goes on, *‘the axe is already waiting to cut down any tree that doesn’t bear good fruit.’*

Is this what the crowds were expecting to hear? Surely John’s reputation as a plain-speaking man would have gone before him. Maybe it is what they were expecting as they don’t walk away but ask, *‘What shall we do?’*

Reminds me of a cartoon showing a sceptic shouting up to the heavens,
‘God, if you’re up there, tell us what we should do!’
Back comes a voice: *‘Feed the hungry, house the homeless, establish justice.’*

The sceptic looks alarmed. *‘Just testing,’* he says.
‘Me too,’ replies the voice.

But John’s advice is unremarkable: *‘Anyone who has two cloaks should give to someone who hasn’t one. The same applies to anyone who has plenty of food.’* He doesn’t waste time going into the details of ethical debate. He doesn’t waste time, like the Pharisees, in debating the small details of law that take energy and time away from actually doing something about the way the world is. There’s no lengthy discussion such as you might expect from a rabbi. He simply sets out two rules of thumb. *‘Two cloaks? Give one away. Too much food? Same applies.’* Nobody could miss the point. Like the great Old Testament prophets, John could see the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. And if the people were really committing themselves to be God’s Israel, the light of the world, the people in whom God’s justice would be seen by all, then something needed to change. And it needed to start with them.

The advice he then gives to tax collectors and soldiers is similarly simple. Nobody likes paying taxes – then or now – and some of the taxes were levied simply at the whim of local rulers - a quick way to get rich. And the collectors

were following suit. John doesn't say they should stop working for the hated rulers, after all, everyone needs to earn a living. But he says, do it honestly. Earn your living and no more. *'Don't collect any more than you are required to.'*

The soldiers are probably from Herod's own troops. Like the tax-collectors, they aren't told to abandon their careers, but they must avoid abusing their position, as was evidently commonplace. No thuggery, no using your brute force to rob people knowing you could get away with it. *'Be content with your pay'* is telling them not to use low wages as an excuse to rob and pillage.

Simple, clear commands; but if they were obeyed, they would demonstrate that people meant business. They would be *'bearing the proper fruit'*. And it's the fact that the commands are simple and clear that I love about this passage. It's almost mundane daily advice on behaviour. It is as if Luke, through John, wants to underline the importance of consistency and detail. We might like to think that our lives are directed by big decisions or grand gestures, but the reality is that our character is set by a million small daily choices. *'Don't make the grand gesture,'* John is seemingly saying. *'That isn't necessary.'*

Rather, share your extra coat and food, and act justly and fairly in your job. Holiness dwells in the detail of these doable actions.' Essentially, his instruction is: *'Do what you need to do, and do it well – with honour and integrity.'* This is a teaching that pagans, Jews and Christians would all acknowledge as inherently worthwhile, and is akin to the universally recognised 'Golden Rule': do to others as you would have them do to you. And we see plenty of this in the church here at All Saints': people filling shoeboxes for children in Liberia; buying food for those forced to use the Foodbank; contributing gifts and essential items for the homeless who access Jimmy's night shelter; visiting those who are unwell; offering a bed and home to someone just out of hospital who needs close observation after a medical procedure. Not grand gestures, but doable actions. Something any one of us can do.

In the ancient world, possessing two coats indicated immense wealth. Having excess food was also a luxury, though John doesn't instruct his hearers to share from plenty, but simply to share what they have. His instructions cover all people, whatever their means. Jesus himself would give more detailed teaching than John. But he never retracted from the things John was saying in this

passage. He too was as committed as John to God's justice working its way out into the world in the behaviour of his followers.

So, what can we take from our passage today? Two things to think about.

Although by society's standards, it wasn't an obvious place from which to reform society, in the desert John was in the place he needed to be at a right time for God's purposes. As strange as it appeared, it was the place and time that God chose to use him in the way he intended – to prepare people for the coming Messiah. Who would have guessed that God would work through the wilderness rather than the Temple? So, a question: Are *you* in the right *place* in your life that you need to be at this *time* in your life? Do you have a sense of purpose? Is there something you need to change, perhaps because it's preventing you from using the gifts God is calling you to use? Are you in the right place at the right time doing the right thing?

And secondly, John the Baptist didn't mince his words. He also had words for everyone. He said that to be holy you don't need to give up what you do, but you do need to do your work, your duties, and live your life with honesty

and compassion. What would he say to us – to each of us – if he were here now and we asked, '*What then should we do?*' This week, I've been buying gifts for my children's Christmas stockings (yes, I know they're adults!). Christmas is a time for giving gifts. But John asks for gifts of 'ordinary life done well'. This might be better represented by an ordinary sock rather than a Christmas stocking. But maybe we could all think of things we could do in our everyday lives, or resources we have that we could share, that would fulfil John's 'ordinary life done well'.

So, to conclude, in a few moments of silence, let's reflect on our own life in the light of this week's gospel reading, and gently ask the question: What should I do?

Prayer:

God of action and of silence, we commit to you today that which we have named in our hearts. Help us to be always ready to evaluate our lives in the light of your challenge and your love. Amen.