

## Sermon for Advent 3 (13<sup>th</sup> December 2009)

Luke 3:7-18, Philippians 4:4-7

I want to talk about something unpleasant. No, it's not money. Nor is it the donkey dung we were making with children yesterday at our Messy Christmas event. I want to talk about repentance. It's what John was talking about at the start of our Gospel reading. John was tackling a subject which reminds brings me of a story of a young man, Michael, who went to confession.

He took his friend Patrick with him, for moral support. Patrick waited outside while Michael went in and entered the confessional: "Forgive me father, I have sinned, I have had impure thoughts about a woman."

"Ah Michael," sighed the priest, "you have grieved the Holy Spirit. Tell me, was it Mary McCarthy?" "I cannot tell you, father" said Michael. "Well, was it Sinead O'Rourke?" asked the priest. "I can't tell you, father" answered Michael. "Tell me, was it Therese Murphy?" "Father, I cannot say, forgive me, I have sinned, I have had impure thoughts about a woman."

The priest pronounced, "Michael, you must say 50 Our Fathers and 30 Hail Marys." "Thank you, father," said Michael, and went outside where his mate Patrick was waiting. "So Michael, what did father say?" "Oh, I got 50 Our Fathers, 30 Hail Marys and three really good suggestions."

Repentance is meaningless unless we are truly sorry and are prepared to change our ways. John's comment 'bear fruits worthy of repentance' (v8) is aimed at just this point – it seems that he saw people coming for baptism and saying all the right things, but then carrying on the same way as before.

The start of true repentance is to recognise our own shortcomings before God. If you are anything like me, you will avoid doing that if you possibly can. Very few people actually *want* to own up to their shortcomings. I'll want to hide them, avoid them, pretend they're not there. Focus on something trivial like when I swore at the cat because he scratched me. Some of them, like my selfish behaviour, have become such deep-seated habits that I don't even notice them. But whether we recognise them or not, they get between us and God, they separate us from God.

Now, my wife is very good at pointing out my shortcomings. But in all seriousness, if we are to progress on our spiritual journey, it can help for someone point out these things for us. In a constructive way. In a loving way. But however we do it, until we acknowledge our shortcomings and bring them out in the open before God (though not necessarily before others), we are unlikely to feel the need to change.

However, when we do offer our failings to God in prayer, say sorry and really mean it, then forgiveness happens. We are released from these things and God comes in their place. And then we are changed - transformed - by God's amazing grace and power. And that's why the vision for our parish has its overarching aim 'the transformation of all human life in Christ'.

But what does John say are the signs of these changes? John is very down to earth and practical - there is no fancy theology or sermonising - but that also means the message is hard-hitting.

Don't extort. Don't accuse people falsely. Be satisfied with your wages. If you have two coats, share with someone who has none. If you have food, share with someone who has none. Now, if I read these things quickly, I can feel pretty good about myself. I don't extort money out of people, not accuse them unfairly (certainly I'm not aware that I do). In times like this I'm glad to have a job, never mind asking for a raise. And in somewhere like Burghfield it's quite hard to find people without any food or clothing.

But what if we think about our lifestyle: the clothes we wear; the food we eat; our houses and the contents; the cars we drive?

Is it possible that our lifestyle might be encouraging extortion by others? Or that our national desire for cheap goods is causing people in other countries to starve? Here are some examples:

Buyers for fashion retailers get wholesale jeans from China at just £2 a pair. Cod landed in Scottish ports is shipped to China for processing, then shipped back to the UK for sale. Flowers are flown from Kenya to the UK, meanwhile nearly 4 million Kenyans are starving because of drought. Our country's desire for cheap food and clothing is met because in places like South Africa the national minimum wage is widely flouted (I know, I've seen it for myself). And across the world 1 billion people do not have clean drinking water.

We can no longer deny that our CO2 emissions are causing climate change that is almost out of control. Large areas are becoming uninhabitable because of sustained drought or flooding as sea levels rise. That's why right now in Copenhagen, 16,000 delegates from 192 countries are spending 12 days debating climate change. Two weeks ago Anne Sutton and Gill were demonstrating for action on this same issue.

As Christians we *cannot* ignore these issues. Read the creation stories in the first two chapters of Genesis (1:28 and 2:15). The creation stories tell us that God gave humankind stewardship of all living things, to care for them and use them responsibly in the service of God and man.

In the UK, I cannot escape the conclusion that our lifestyle must change - we must consume less and pay more, in order that others may live. Now that's a deeply unpopular message. National governments instinctively act in self-interest, and in the absence of extreme circumstances, individuals do much the same.

I am not suggesting that any one of us can solve these problems alone. But I am saying that our awareness of these problems, combined with our Christian faith, means that we must not ignore them either. We must pray and then act – find some way to combat the injustices of our age, just as John did in his.

Now you're probably all thoroughly depressed by now! But I want to finish by turning to our epistle. Paul writes: 'Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer ... let your requests be made known to God' (Philippians 4:6). Do not worry about anything. I think this can be one of the hallmarks of Christians today. When the whole world is losing the plot, Christians can remain calm and confident. That does not mean we stand on the sidelines watching. It doesn't mean we don't care – we care deeply. But we need not worry because in the end God is in control.

Listen our Lord's prayer. *Our Father* in heaven ... for the kingdom, the *power* and the glory are *yours*. If we think we have power, we're kidding ourselves. The power is God's. And that should reassure us no end. Amen

Blessings  
Kevin