



“Bear fruits worthy of repentance”

Sermon by the Right Reverend John R. Stephens
December 12, 2021, Advent III
Episcopal Visit to St. Timothy, Brentwood

It is great to be with you here at St. Timothy’s. I have been Bishop of the Diocese for about nine months and it is indeed a pleasure to be with you in worship and come to learn more about your ministry here in this place and at this time. I am so grateful to your rector, James and for his ministry as your priest, pastor and teacher. He has done so much good work in determining God’s calling for the parish of St. Timothy’s here and now, and as we look toward the future. I am also grateful to Deacon Lilian for her amazing ministry of pastoral care as a deacon. She will be retiring at the end of this year, but I wanted to say how appreciative I am of her ministry and her response to the calling of Deacon. It is great to be with all of you today.

John the Baptizer... this is someone who just does not mess around. He does not gently raise a topic, he barges straight ahead into it. He is not passive aggressive; he is just plain aggressive. He calls a spade a shovel... or the crowds who came to hear him a brood of vipers. He is annoying and pestering. You know how people say that at parties or family gatherings one should always avoid the topics of religion and politics well John doesn’t care about that; he is all about barreling

ahead and talking about both, at length, in detail, with strength, not caring one bit about etiquette. Just the person you want at your Christmas party. But here he is in our Christmas preparations, for he is a main character of Advent. He did not care about what others saw as appropriate, he was quite happy to unsettle anyone and everyone. If you believe in God show it, reveal it, live it, don't mess around and just get on with it, he might have said. It needs to change you, mold you, form you. He was not your middle of the road, comfortable Christian.

And I can't help but like him.

Last week he was talking about preparing the way of the Lord, making paths straight, filling valleys and lowering mountains, straightening the crooked and smoothing the rough. It was all lovely and poetic, the metaphors stirring, capturing an enigmatic description of God coming to us, offering a contemporary-art kind of imagery.

But today he blows all that poetic prose out the window and says, OK here is what that looks like. This is what the bulldozer looks like, and it is not pretty but gets to the heart of how we might live in response to God coming amongst us. He said, "Bear fruits worthy of repentance." He said, "If you have two coats, share with anyone who has none." He said, "If you have food, offer some to someone who has none." He said, "Don't extort money from anyone, find some satisfaction in your wages." He said, "Get ready to be baptized with the Holy Spirit and fire." He might have said, "See the kingdom of God is at hand and keep praying with me, thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven." Faith in the God of love, to him, was not something that sat on the shelf looking pretty but involved taking a coat off your back and getting mustard on your fingers as you offer a sandwich to a stranger. Faith was not comfort food for him but a call to action.

In one of the parishes that I served we would regularly have a visit to the office by this elderly man who looked rough. He had lived on the streets for many years. He did not like many other people. He was not polite. He could get angry, he could swear, he could be demanding for help. But for years he had been coming to Anglican churches, it seems, hoping to get some help with food and anything else he might need to survive a day or a week. I will call him Harry, not his real name but perhaps it suits him. After a few difficult encounters with Harry, where he yelled at members of the staff team, frightened some of the children and parents who would come to the preschool in the church building, and was so angry and loud it was impossible to tolerate, Harry and I came to a deal. "Harry," I said, "we need to get something sorted." He didn't think we did and only scowled at me. "You can only come to the church on Tuesday mornings at this certain time and we will help you out, otherwise we won't." Expecting fireworks, I cringed to see what the reaction

would be. “Okay,” growled Harry. And so, we had a deal. And he stuck to his end of the bargain, and I stuck to mine.

Every Tuesday morning Harry would arrive, and we would offer him several things that he might need to get through the next few days. Well, it was not long before the office volunteer, Betty, started to make a sandwich for Harry and ensure that the coffee was on when he arrived. She would pour his coffee, add a little bit of milk and a lot of sugar and stir the cup with great care and then bring it to Harry.

As time went along, Betty, started to make sure that she had a roast for her Sunday dinner to ensure that Harry would have a really good sandwich come Tuesday. A ham or roast beef or roast lamb, all carefully prepared. She would lovingly put the sandwich on a plate and bring it to Harry with a huge smile and a “Here you go Harry, it’s great to see you.” Harry was grateful, well as grateful as the street hardened, life battered Harry would want to show. “Thanks Mary,” he would say even though we tried to correct him many a time that her name was Betty. “Thanks Mary, you are really good to me,” he offered one day. This went on for weeks, months, even a couple of years. I have thought about this scene for many a year. Harry was a no-nonsense, angry, frustrated, lonely, homeless man who did not want to change any of this for the world. But somehow Betty saw in him the gospel according to John the Baptizer. A gospel of recognizing the Christ, the presence of Jesus Christ, not just in those stained-glass windows of his birth in a barn with gold-clad angels floating in and out... but in the real humanity of this world. Betty seemed to see what many others failed to see that faith in the love of God is not just a nice slogan for a website but sometimes involves a coffee with four spoonfuls of sugar and roast beef on a Sunday night.

Today in the aftermath of flooding, fires and unbearable heat, as other dire warnings echo around our planet because of the way we have abused it and continue steer around any solution... where Indigenous people are seeking to be seen as full human beings and the concept of reconciliation actually lived... where drug overdoses are skyrocketing and little seems to be happening to change that.... where vaccines are plentiful in some parts of our world and very scarce in others... where racism and fear of the stranger is regularly seen... The words of John the Baptizer once more come showering upon us to shatter our sense of comfort and awaken us to God coming into this world: He said “Bear fruits worthy of repentance.” He said, “If you have two coats, share with anyone who has none.” He said, “If you have food, offer some to someone who has none.” He said, “Get ready to be baptized with the Holy Spirit and fire.” And he meant it. Simple things on one level but earth shattering and uncomfortable on another.

Today is often known as Gaudete Sunday, or joy Sunday, or rose Sunday, the Sunday we light the third Advent candle and focus on the word joy. This may seem odd when I have been talking much about John the baptizer and the expectations, he placed on us but also the brood of vipers he greeted long ago. The joy of this day is not joy in the sense of don't worry, be happy. Not just a warm fuzzy. This is the joy of discovering deeper purpose and meaning, the kind of joy that feeds the soul. The kind of joy that John the Baptizer was aiming at.

As we continue to live in this pandemic, continue to keep some social distancing, continue to be wary of what we do and where we go, it is this kind of joy that has gained a fair bit of attention. For as all of us have been hunkered down and gone into hiding for so very long, we have had time to think. To think about what is most important. We have considered a little more carefully what it is that God might be calling us toward in our lives. What are we to do with this gift that we have been given, the gift of life itself? The result of this thinking, for many people, is to realize how important community is. That we are part of something so much larger than just ourselves or our family unit or even our neighbourhood. We need one another. We see God in one another. We are called to live, truly live, in communion with one another where we offer a coat or food to those living with hunger, fairness in business or help when others have been flooded out, or compassion when it can seem hard to find. Where we offer a cup of coffee with far too much sugar and make a sandwich from the best we have to offer. In this there is a joy, a deep, profound, intense, Spirit-filled, God-inviting joy. Where we realize a deep longing known in the very heart of who we are, that we are called to something higher and greater than simply putting in our time on this planet. That the coming of Christ once more at Christmas is calling us to explore this kingdom of God, not just in a life to come but in this moment and place and possibility. Bear fruits, John the Baptizer said, bear fruits worthy of repentance.