

***1...the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with a skin disease are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me, and 2. You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee the wrath to come? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance...Even now the axe is already at the root of the trees and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be thrown into fire..***

The first reading is from our lesson this evening is part of Jesus answer to the disciples of John the Baptist whom John, imprisoned by Herod, has dispatched to ask if Jesus is, indeed, the Messiah. The second reading is from Matthew 3:10. It is John's reaction to seeing Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism. He continues in the next two verses, *I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I, and I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."*

The very great difference in tone between the two readings says much to us, if we will but listen. John is reflecting the understandable expectation of many 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews for a Messiah. They were looking for someone who would rise up and deliver Israel from its long line of conquerors, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Macedonians, the Seleucids, and the Romans. Nearly 8 centuries with only about 100 years not under the heel of one empire or another. They anticipated a time of great violence with the major differentiator being, finally, Jewish victory. Hence John's emphasis on wrath, the axe, his winnowing fork, and unquenchable fire.

As he does so many times, Jesus overturns expectations. No promise of military triumphs, no brutal reprisals, no raising up of a glorious army with bemedalled generals. No! The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are risen, and the poor for the first time in generations of existence have good news. Jesus answer to John's disciples is a near direct quote from Isaiah 35: *then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be opened; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.* But after 8 centuries of oppression is it any wonder that the expectation of a Messiah would be radically different than who Jesus was and what Jesus did.

Let us be clear that Jesus is not repudiating John, *As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What, then, did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What, then, did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' "Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has*

*arisen greater than John the Baptist, yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.*

Jesus then describes John as Elijah who was always thought as the one who would return from his bodily ascent into heaven to announce the arrival of the Messiah.

Perhaps the key portion of our reading tonight says it all: *For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.*" I think we are seeing around the world the emergence of the kinds of leaders John hoped the Messiah would have been to resoundingly disastrous effects.

If you were here last week, you might remember we were dealing with the last shall be first and the first shall be last. In many parts of our world, relatively new democracies and well-established democracies are coming under threat. Primarily because electorates are putting in place authoritarians who convince the voters that their lives are under threat by "others" and only this, usually right-wing candidate, can save them. In every case from the United States to the UK to France to Germany to Russia to Turkey to Israel to India and a myriad of other countries people are falling for the promises of right-wing so-called saviours. All of them in different ways modelling the behaviour of a messiah that so many craved before Jesus turned everything around. And who profits? the plutocrats. Never before in our lifetimes has it become so apparent that the "first shall be first" and the rest can be forgotten. But these latter day "messiahs" are as false as false can possibly be. John described them as a brood of vipers which does them too much honour.

I read a very interesting transcript of an interview on the day that I prepared this homily. Peter Wehner in the New York Times interviewed Nicholas Wolterstorff a very prominent Christian Philosopher. Wolterstorff makes the point that Psalm 72 says: *Give the king your justice, O God and your righteousness to the king's son, That he may rule your people righteously and the poor with justice....* I remind you that justice simply means to be in right relationship with God and one another. Are we in right relationship with the world's newly minted trillionaire and his doubtless envious formerly colleague billionaires? And let us be clear, are we in right relationship with the legions of people in this world poorer than we? Wolterstorff goes on to say that in Romans 13, Paul makes it clear that "government" is a gift from God to ensure God's justice prevails. Today, governments all around the world supported by duped electorates are enforcing policies that maximize individual freedom at the expense of justice for all. I should be able to do what I like no matter how hard I have to step on you, leave alone the billions of folk poorer than you.

I have little claim on prophecy, but 50 years ago last fall, I started to teach at Capilano College. I well remember telling my students that a world was emerging that for success in politics all one had to do was discover of what people were afraid, and tell them they were absolutely right to be so afraid, and only you could protect them. I had no idea just how right I was. I wish with all my heart that I

**could say that I was wrong. Please keep that in mind as you prepare to cast your vote in future elections – while you still have a vote.**

**Our Saviour, our Messiah, our Christ showed a very different and more healthful way. When will the last be first amongst us? Amen**