

The season of Advent is a time of repentance and a reminder that is all is not well with us or the world.

In our Gospel reading in Luke 3, John's words are harsh and his call to repentance is tinged with eschatological (end of time) fervour. He is the prophet who prepares the way for his cousin Jesus, for a new beginning and for salvation.

Salvation implies that one is being saved from something and John does not hold back as he describes the people's predicament then and ours today. The one who cries in the wilderness is not greeting us with imagery that puts our conscience at ease.

There is no imagery here of abundance and provision of lush vegetation, a garden of abundance. This is a wilderness, harsh and unrelenting - think of Moses and the Israelites in the Exodus from Egypt. It is the language of a desert barren of possibility. This is the world after the Fall, subject to judgement and wrath.

When John cries out "You brood of vipers!" he is implying that they are children of a serpent. It is a postlapsarian (after the Fall) epithet that we would never accept as proper church etiquette - "Happy Sunday, you children of vipers! Blessed Advent, you're a descendent of snakes." This is extremely harsh and unpleasant imagery.

Obviously John wants his listeners to understand that the stakes are high. There is something not right with the world and with his audience itself. His message is not to flee the world, running from what the world is and from who they are, but they are to repent, to begin the process of producing fruit in this wilderness environment. This command must seem impossibly confounding to his listeners in this world of deprivation that John inhabits.

He goes even further in shaking the seemingly firm foundations of their identity. I hope we are listening here when he says not to take pride in your ethno-religious heritage. "Do not begin to say to yourselves 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." (Luke 3.8-9) Obviously, this is located in a specific time and historical context.

What is the message here for us during this third week of Advent?

Well, I think one thing to take away is that perhaps we should not be complacent with an easy conscience or to be too glib about our Christian identity - Hey, I am a Christian, I have been saved by the blood of Lamb! This is a reminder to me that we should not fool ourselves. The fruit you and I bear still matters. During Advent, like during Lent, we recite the Ten Commandments in their entirety. No doubt to remind ourselves of the Law which Jesus did not come to destroy but to fulfil, this Law that we do not practice and certainly in our hearts we do not fulfil.

During this time we are being reminded that it is still this God, whose salvation we seek from this world.

John's audience asks "What should we do?"

He instructs them. Listen to this, they are not simple guidelines for living your best life now or discovering the divine within. Sorry. "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." (Luke 3.11) Share!

"Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.'" (Luke 3 12-13) Stop taking more than you should!

"Soldiers also asked him, 'And we, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.'" (Luke 3.14) Do not exploit or oppress others!

John knows his audience, he knows where their hearts are, he understands the world the way it is, the world they are seeking to be saved from.

His message is to stop doing those immoral things that are accepted practice in the world, and to repent for those things that you know are wrong. Start doing those things that you know are right.

This should not be understood according to what I find to be an increasingly tired and unhelpful discussion of works verses grace. As Christians we should all know that works themselves are not sufficient for salvation, but it is foolish to imply no deeds or fruit should be expected from us as Christians. They are the outgrowth, the fruit and signs of Christian life and witness. We agree on this. John understands that these acts, these works of good will, are necessary

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expressions of the intentions of the heart, a necessary part of preparing one's self for the one who is to come.

This means taking some responsibility for the world and our role in it and not to seek to run away from it but to abide, serve and wait for the coming of our Lord without retreating into the shallower aspects of cultural religious identity and tribalism.

These words of John's chosen during this season, as provocative as they are, should strike us at our core and cause us to consider our actions and deeds and the intentions of our hearts. Living lives of repentance, seeking the good and rejecting the evil matter just as much today during this Advent as they meant in the time of John the Baptist, and especially, in the moral and ethical wilderness of our present age.