

Spiritual Winnowing

Zephaniah 3:14-20, Song of Isaiah, Philipians 4:4-7, Luke 3:7-18

Luke's gospel is probably the one most loved by the makers of Christmas greeting cards. There are angels, shepherds, and great rejoicing. All this comes earlier in Luke's gospel, before today's reading about John the Baptist. And we will come to those readings later in the month, with great joy in our hearts.

But not yet.

As followers of Christ we prepare for Christmas. We do more than decorate the tree, hang the tinsel, stir the pudding and search for the perfect gift for each person on our list. Those things are good to do, but they are not our first priority. We are not just preparing for long-awaited visitors, or a family reunion.

This may be true of some people but as followers of Christ we prepare to celebrate the coming of the living God into our world, just as John exhorted people to prepare their hearts for the coming of the Lord.

The season of Advent is not a time to prepare our homes and our gift lists, though we may do those things. It is a time to prepare our hearts.

Today's Gospel reading is very apt for the penitential season of Advent. John the Baptist was well-known and popular with the people who came from near and far to be baptised by him. John was not a man who argued about theology or the complicated interpretation of scripture. He was a simple man with a simple message. He called people to repentance. It is hard to imagine such a call bringing popularity today. He asked people to prepare for the coming of the Lord - to prepare not for a birthday party but for judgement.

He asked people to consider their lives and their relationship with God.

Some of those who listened to John were feeling very good at this point, complacently thinking, "Well, that other lot certainly need to make some improvements but I'm well positioned here. I'm one of God's chosen people. No problems for me."

But did John say to them, "Welcome, chosen ones of God?" No, it was "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?" They must have been quite shocked. John was not one to pull punches, but he was no empty name-caller either. He proceeded to tell them what they could not see for themselves.

They may have thought of themselves as God's people but their lives did not reflect this. Let's just pause a minute here and reflect on our lives. We call ourselves God's people. We say that we are walking together with Jesus to take

his life into the world. Does this show in our lives? We are human and vulnerable. We struggle and fall down and get back up. We do try to live our lives as God's people in the world. We will never do a perfect job of this but we can persist in faithfulness. Each day we can start again. Each evening we can reflect on how we did. It is only if we think we are perfect that we will cease trying.

This is what John tried to tell the complacent who thought that they had no need of repentance. He got very specific about their daily actions. They claimed to be God's people but they were not acting in that way. They were not living ethically, nor were they treating their neighbours fairly. Any professed love of God was not evident in love for their neighbours.

The people started to think, "This sounds like serious stuff. Maybe John is the Messiah." But John immediately sets them right about this too. There is one who is more powerful than John, more worthy than John. John's baptism cannot be compared with the coming one's baptism with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

And he also comes with judgement.

He will sort the wheat from the chaff. The wheat will be gathered into his barn and the chaff burned in a fire so fierce it cannot be extinguished. This sounds threatening and severe, but Luke says that John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them. Good news, not just a warning of judgement and destruction! He exhorted them to repent and amend their ways, to shed their selfishness and dishonesty or self-deception, and he preached the good news that the Messiah was coming.

You have to think that the coming Messiah would only be good news of forgiveness and salvation if your heart was filled with good grains of wheat and not worthless chaff - hence the call to repentance, to find the chaff in our lives and shed it so as to find those precious grains of wheat. So Advent can be for us a time to do that vital winnowing.

We're about halfway through Advent. How's it going? I think my wheat will probably always be a bit chaffy.

By the way, modern wheat is bred to separate easily from the husks or chaff. In John's time it was much harder work. I think separating spiritual wheat and chaff is about as hard as it comes. Complacency and self-deception are tough to crack, especially from the inside!

Nevertheless, there is joy amongst the tough tasks. We can remember the words of Zephaniah: *At that time I will gather you; at that time I will bring you home.*

And from Philippians: *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

Now that's good news.

At this time of repentance and heart-searching, we can find our peace in God, the peace that guards our hearts and minds in Christ. There is no safer place.