



Third Sunday in Advent

Sermon by Revd Sharmain James



Sunday 12 December 2021

READINGS

Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6 for the Psalm; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

What should we do

There are certain questions in life that remain important to us all through our lives. One of those questions is: 'What should we do?' What is the good thing to do – OR – the right thing to do? It is a question we will often find ourselves asking. If we have in our hearts the desire to do what is right, what is best, then that question will always be important for us.

'What must we do, as a church, as a society? - What must I do in my own personal life?' For us as followers of Jesus, - the question, 'What must I do?' becomes 'What does the Lord want me to do?' 'What is the Lord asking of me?' The answer to that question won't always be easy to find. We may need guidance. We may need to talk to someone who can help us to see what it is we must do, what it is the Lord is asking of us here and now.

We're celebrating the 3rd Sunday of Advent now. We're watching and waiting for the coming of Christ. And the same question might be in our hearts: What then should we do? That question is at the centre of today's gospel. Today's gospel is the continuation of last week's. You may remember the refrain from last week: Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight. Valleys shall be filled. Mountains and hills shall be made low. The crooked shall be made straight. The rough ways shall be made smooth.

Last week John the Baptist was a voice crying in the wilderness. This week he is calling for repentance, threatening wrath, fire, and axes. - He doesn't want excuses, he wants action. "Bear fruits worthy of repentance," he says. His message of repentance was succeeding - before you knew it, John got people asking "What should we do?"

- That question is asked of John the Baptist three times.
- The crowds ask it.
- The tax collectors ask it.
- The soldiers ask it.
- It's a question many of us are asking these days.

How many of you have had circumstances in your personal life or relationships that left you asking that question? What then should I do? I suspect we all have.

- What's behind that question?
- What's it really about?

What should we do?" That's not necessarily a question people ask when things are going well. - I think that question points to and reveals our sense of powerlessness. It's what we ask when we're weary, bored, disillusioned, or desperate. "What should we do?" When we ask that question – we are saying that we've come up against something bigger than ourselves. In times like ours, it is so easy to get bogged down in a mood of despair. Problems all around us are so great. We are scared and overwhelmed. Life is out of control. We feel helpless to fix the situation.

When we feel powerless, that's when we cry out, "What then should we do?" Our response to that question must begin not with what is happening around us but with what is happening within us. Isn't that what John Baptist is telling those who come to him? He doesn't ask them to change the world but to change themselves. He doesn't tell them to quit their jobs but to live a different life. John the Baptist didn't tell them — to go and establish some huge social service agency to reach out to lepers and to other marginalized people in the culture of the day? He basically sent every person who came to him back home - to his or her regular life, regular activities, regular vocation and then told each person, - "Do what you've been doing but do it better, do it more honestly, do it as an act of service for others."

Share what you have, John said. Be honest and above board in your work, John said. Be faithful to whatever task is yours to perform in life. The crowds who came to him could not eliminate poverty, but they could share what they have with the cold and hungry. The tax collectors who came to him could not fix the tax code, but they could be honest. The soldiers who came to him could not end the Roman occupation, but they could act with integrity and not abuse their power. In each of those situations John focuses on people and relationships. His answers are simple, concrete, practical.

What does this all mean for us? In this Advent season, are we seeking the answers to the question "What should we do?" As we wait and as we look forward to the coming of the Messiah, are we engaging in the kind of deep self-reflection that leads to action? Or have we fallen into complacency? Are we gathering like the crowds in John's story, moving toward genuine repentance? Or are we turning away – because we feel offended that repentance has a place in the Christmas story??

Today is the 3rd Sunday in Advent - the third Sunday in Advent is often called "Rejoice Sunday. When John the Baptist was still a foetus - he first leapt at the presence of Mary and Jesus. He rejoiced at the sound of his "bridegroom's" voice. When it was time for him to "decrease" so that Jesus could "increase," he did so willingly, saying, "My joy is now full." So where does joy come from? Maybe it comes from true repentance. From the great relief of laying our burdens down. Maybe joy comes when we hear a shockingly painful truth about ourselves — "You brood of vipers!" -- and decide to listen rather than run.

Maybe joy comes – when we offer God every part of our lives and give God permission to "clear" us — to separate all that's destructive from all that is good, beautiful, and priceless. Bear fruits worthy of repentance," John tells the crowds who flock to him in the wilderness. But also, bear it — endure it. Your life is a golden field, ripe for sacred fire. Yes, the fire hurts, but the One who applies the flame is trustworthy. He knows you. He sees you. He loves you. And he will gather you with joy.

This brings us hope even amid our struggles so that when the Christ child arrives at the manger, we can rejoice and sing with gusto, "Joy to the world! The Lord is come." For now, we pray, "Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us."