

All change!

Well, it's not very geschillige, is it? My Dutch is pretty non-existent and if I understand it right geschillige is pretty untranslatable but I gather that it has a sense of warmth and cosiness and I guess it's a word that comes into its own at Christmas time. Christmas, surely, if anything, is geschillige – at least in this part of the world. Christmas is warmth and peace and Christmas trees and tinsel and candles. And in the approach to Christmas we want to cultivate geschillige and to get into that mellow mood. It's why we decorated the church this week to make it look so pretty. But it's also why we could well do without our reading this morning from Luke's gospel which is about as far from geschillige as you can probably get – John yelling at us about repentance and calling us a brood of vipers and preaching unquenchable fire. We wonder why we have to put up with this and why John the Baptist is such a staple ingredient of the advent season. On our magical geschillige advent journey each year to the inn and the stable and the manger, why do we have to take this detour into the wilderness and there encounter this wild weirdo haranguing us about the fires of judgement and axes hacking at trees?

Well, maybe we need John the Baptist on our advent journey. Maybe we need John to rough us up a bit and to throw us off balance. Maybe we need John the Baptist to disturb us just in case our faith becomes a narcotic, just in case our religion becomes a cosy geschillige blanket that insulates us against the real world – always a danger with faith and not least around Christmas time. So let's go and join John out there in the desert. Let's go and listen to what he has to say to the crowds that come out to be baptized and maybe we will find that he has something to say to us. And here is the first thing that is striking about John's message. I spoke last week when we looked at the first verses of this chapter in Luke about John's location – out in the wilderness. John wasn't to be found in the temple in Jerusalem. He wasn't to be found up there in the citadels of power. He wasn't to be found in the TV studios and the chat shows and the gossip columns because his is a movement that is mobilising outside the establishment. His is a movement that is forming outside the power structures and politics of his day. The danger, however,

with such a movement is that it simply blames those who are in power, scapegoating the establishment and blaming the rulers and those in authority. You know the mentality – the world's ills are always someone else's fault and someone else's responsibility to put right. So we talk about 'they', don't we? 'They' who should do something about it. 'They' should stop global warming, we say. 'They' should end immigration. 'They' should do more to stop terrorism. What are 'they' doing about crime? And it's never quite clear who exactly 'they' are but one thing for certain is that 'they' sure aren't us. 'They' aren't me. And of course one reason why the world's problems become 'their' responsibility is because the world's problems are so big and intractable that there is nothing that you and I can do about them anyway. They are out of our reach and influence.

This, however, is where John's message is so radical. John doesn't bad-mouth the establishment. He doesn't blame the Jerusalem elite for all the ills of the world. He doesn't sound off about 'them' and how it's all their fault. No - he challenges us. He lays responsibility on the crowds of ordinary folk who flocked out the desert to hear him. He doesn't point the finger elsewhere. No, the finger points not at 'them' but at you and me.

Note, however, another feature of John's message. What he tells people to do is relatively modest. It's almost bland in fact. He doesn't ask people to join the revolution. He doesn't ask people to man the barricades and to storm the citadels. He doesn't ask people to change the world. When the people ask 'what then should we do' his answer is disappointingly dull and restrained: 'if you've got two coats, share one with someone who has none'; 'if you're a tax collector stop cheating'; 'if you're a soldier do an honest job and cut out corruption.' Wow. It's somewhat underwhelming. This is not exactly going to have Karl Marx shouting 'Amen!' This is hardly Mao Tse Tung's little Red Book. Just when everybody is fired up to join the revolution and to jump on the bandwagon John says go back home, back to where you came from and live honest, decent lives of integrity.

So much for the revolution. But of course there is a reason for what John says. John, you see, is as aware as anyone of the state of the world. He knows it needs changing. He feels its pains and its sorrows and its injustices. But for John the good news is that God is coming to change things! This is John's core message, that God is coming to save the world. That's why earlier in the chapter he quotes that wonderful passage from

the prophet Isaiah: 'prepare the way of the Lord... every valley shall be filled and every mountain shall be made low... and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.' That passage is telling us that God is coming to take a grip on the world. God's rule is breaking in. The salvation of God is appearing, but that means that salvation is not down to us. We can't save the world. We can't defeat the evil that poisons and infects everything. Only God can do that and God is acting decisively by sending Jesus. He is the more powerful one whose coming John proclaims. He is the one who will baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire, purging the world of its sin.

That, however, does not absolve us of all responsibility. We can play our part and our part is simply to live in grateful response. No, we can't save the world. Only God can do that. But what we can do is live lives of simple honesty and integrity and generosity. And that means lighting our small corner where we live and work with fidelity and truth and goodness. That's all: our role in saving the world is modest but that's because God's role is so great.

One last thing, though. What about the fire? What about that scary stuff that John ends his message with - the one who comes to baptise with fire? What about that one whose winnowing fork is in his hand and who will gather up the wheat but who will burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. Again - not very geschillige, is it? And isn't it rather odd that after scaring the life out of us with all this talk of unquenchable fire the passage concludes with the words, 'So with many exhortations John proclaimed the good news to the people.' What? Good news? Having just ear-bashed the people with the threat of all becoming burnt toast we are told that this is the good news. Really? If this is the good news, spare us the bad! Well, let me tell you, this message of wheat winnowed and chaff burnt is gospel. It's good news, because what is being described here is purification. What is being described here is not blanket destruction. This is not God coming at us with a flame-thrower. This is not an angry God despatching miserable sinners to the fires of hell. This is a God whose fierce, fiery love comes to burn away all the chaff, all the rubbish, all the dross that has no real place in our lives, so as to set us free to be our true selves. Let me put it like this: the only part of me that God will ever burn away is what is really not me at all. The only part of me that God will ever destroy is that which clings to my life like a parasite, pervading my life like a cancer and violating who I truly am. The

only me that God will ever destroy is that impostor who masquerades as me far too much of the time but which is not really me at all. This is God's purifying love. It's a fierce, searing love that has created me and made me for its own glory and that will not be satisfied with anything less. It's a burning love that must rescue me from that which would deface and defile what God has created me to be. And if there is such a thing as hell then maybe that is what it is all about: that holy place of all consuming love where I am finally purged of everything that must go, so that I may be released and liberated into eternal life.

Listening to John the Baptist I'm reminded of a saying by the writer D.H. Lawrence. He quotes a verse in the Book of Hebrews, 'it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God' – and then he adds, 'but it's a far more fearful thing to fall out of them'. And that is the gospel. It's the gospel of a God whose love is a consuming fire and there is a right and necessary fear of God and shame on us for taming and domesticating God and turning God into our big kindly uncle in the sky. But if it's a fearful thing to fall into the hands of such a God it's a far more fearful thing to fall out of them. And that can never, ever happen, for underneath are the everlasting arms.

Give thanks, therefore for John the Baptist. Give thanks for John who prevents Christmas from being a geschillige indulgence. Give thanks for John who proclaims that God is coming to save what only God can save – but hear him challenge us to the only rightful response, a life of honesty and integrity. And give thanks for the one who comes after John, baptising us with the Holy Spirit of fire – and who loves us so much that it burns. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Heavenly Father, Lord of Earth, Sea and Sky,

Forgive us when we are complacent when it comes to our environment. Help us to use *every* opportunity that we have to reduce our carbon footprint.

Never let us forget that we *all* have a role to play in making the world a better place.

We give thanks for the agreements made at the Paris Summit and pray for real commitment to make these promises a reality.

Lord Bless world leaders and all of us with honesty and integrity in all our affairs.

Lord bless those who work for justice and equal rights for all people. Forgive those who are prejudiced fill them with your light and understanding.

Lord, Protect your people who are victims of war. Save them from hatred, violence and terrorism. Lord, shine your light in their grief and fear.

And above all, Lord we pray that your presence will help to bring Peace in our world.

And to Save us all from perpetuating violence.

We thank you Lord for the opportunities that we have to be active in your world.

Especially we thank you for the people of our congregation who are often less visible but play *enormously* important roles in our mission like the volunteers participating in the Bread Run, Donating and Delivering Food to the FoodBank and those who Cook in the Kloof. Lord, bless our interactions with the homeless and needy in Amsterdam and in the world.

Lord, we pray for your blessing on our congregation, especially for those who are infirm and unable to attend because of bad health.

We pray for friends who are not here today or have moved away from Amsterdam.

And for those who may have attended only once.

Lord, We thank you for them all *and* for our freedom to attend here today.

As we contemplate your loving forgiveness Lord, help us to live honest and truthful lives.

In your holy name we pray,
Amen