Advent 3C: Zephaniah 3: 14-end; Philippians 4: 4-7; **Luke 3: 7-18**

 John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. 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.’

 And the crowds asked him, ‘What then should we do?’ In reply he said to them, ‘Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.’ 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.’ 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.’

 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, ‘I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.’

 So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

Those of you with sharp eyes will have noticed that the Advent candle for today is not purple (penitential, preparational purple) but pink – or more properly in church terms ‘rose’. That is because today is Gaudete Sunday, translated as Joy Sunday. It is to Advent what Mothering Sunday is to Lent – the sort of half-way point.

But we are also halfway through the telling of the story of John the Baptist, so we must expect a bit of judgement alongside the joy. Not, as I hope you will come to see, necessarily a bad thing.

John the Baptist goes in hard. He calls the crowd a brood of vipers. And talks of ‘the wrath to come’. He suggests they jolly well shouldn’t flee from the wrath to come. And says there’s no benefit in claiming Israel as God’s chosen people, and hoping thereby to be immune from judgement, because God can sort Himself out some new chosen ones in the twinkling of an eye. Clear pointers from John of judgement to come then.

Judgement gets, in many ways, a bit of a bad press. We think of it as a bad thing to pass judgement on someone (and perhaps it is when we do it to each other) and there are certainly negative connotations attached to the word ‘judgemental’. Whereas originally, judgement was about assessing and establishing what was the truth. (I think I said only last week that for some of the most disadvantaged in our society, judgement maybe can’t come soon enough).

And in a sense, a God who doesn’t exercise judgement is more idol than God, because that might presuppose that humankind can do what it likes without any kind of comeback. If we take judgement away, we end up with laissez faire; anything goes. And that, surely, is Hell. In a world where so much is wrong (a backpacker in New Zealand killed, hundreds of thousands in the Yemen starving to death), life clearly is not what it should be. None of these things are how they should be; they are destructive; so by that token, judgement really needs to be viewed as a good thing.

In terms of Advent and the coming Incarnation, we have in Christ a judge who is not red in the face and angry, jabbing us in the chest with his finger; here is a judge who is gentle but firm; who comes to us in humility; who bears the wounds, the scars of our own judgement on his own body – salvation and judgement all wrapped up together – so we are not, if you like, saved FROM judgement, but saved through judgement. Everything John tells the crowds is good news precisely because of who is our judge.

This radical teaching from John led the people to wonder if John himself might be the Messiah – he spoke with authority and it was almost as though they had been waiting for, hoping for and expecting someone to talk this kind of sense, even though on the face of it, it sounded harsh. It is interesting that, as he debunks that burgeoning theory, he tells them that the Messiah is coming to gather the wheat and burn the chaff. But it is all under the heading ‘good news’ …. Judgement in his terms is drawing a line; putting things right and drawing a line in the sand – which we can’t do for ourselves.

The House of Bishops has been meeting this past week, for three days, at Lambeth Palace, the workplace and home of the Archbishop of Canterbury. Which is of course very close to the Palace of Westminster, seat and workplace of our government. And it was broadcast yesterday that the Church is being exhorted to pray along with the Bishops, for the current parlous state of our country – the disarray of the government, the fragility of our relationship with Europe, our standing in the rest of the world. Somehow, through this whole situation, we are all under judgement, and this is bringing out the worst in us, not the best.

John the Baptist, in his taunt about being a brood of vipers, is expressing the fact that we all need to show a spirit of repentance. And the people’s response is: What should we do? – which is a question for all of us in this extraordinary and divisive situation. And John gives them very clear directions, depending on who they are. He tells them straight how they ought to be behaving. He says to the tax collectors: take only what you are due………. And for us that might look like: don’t pull sickies; finders isn’t keepers; expenses aren’t meant to be extra profit. We can all fill in the blanks for ourselves…

He says: share all you have with those who don’t have …… Where you have more than enough – two coats, or spare food – give what you don’t actually need to someone who has none.

He says: be happy with your lot…… be satisfied with your wages. There is that old apocryphal story told to small children being fussy at the dinner table long ago, where the child didn’t want to finish a meal and was told: there are children in Africa (or wherever) who would be grateful for that food that you are leaving. And the response: well send it to them then, because I don’t want it.

But John’s point isn’t that; it isn’t: be satisfied because there are people who have much less than you do. John’s point is more: know when you have enough and be satisfied with that. Be aware of your blessings and don’t diminish them by comparing them with what others have. It isn’t about comparisons; it’s about absolutes.

As we try to find our way through these tumultuous times we live in; as we seek the Kingdom of God in these times, that requires certain behaviours. There are certain things we know we can do in order to behave appropriately, if you like…

There is a saying that many of you who have been on management courses have probably heard before… It goes: you can’t think your way into a new way of acting, but you can act your way into a new way of thinking…. We need to learn to act as ones who are forgiven; who are living, not under judgement, but who are passing through judgement – so it is about acting out all these things: love, compassion, neighbourliness, generosity, kindness, openness – and all these are essential ingredients for building good community and reflecting the kingdom of God. And to live in that way is actually the root and source of our joy. Joy is compassion, generosity, positivity. These things **are** the fruits of our repentance. When we are sorry and resolve to do differently, these things are what results.

**A final word** on the other two readings – not as an after-thought, but because they chime so brilliantly with what we have heard and learned from the gospel today: did you notice that the Old Testament lesson from Zephaniah said: The Lord your God is in your midst, and You shall fear disaster no more, and At that time I will bring you home?

And did you notice that the New Testament reading from Philippians said: Do not worry about anything, and The Lord is near?

I have nothing to add except: **Amen**