

## Year C Advent 3

Zephaniah 3: 14-20

Philippians 4: 4-7

Luke 3: 7-18

“What Should We Do?”

Here we are, on the third Sunday in Advent, when the theme is ‘joy’. And for some of my priestly colleagues, the chance to wear some rose – not pink – vestments. A day when we focus on rejoicing.

Zephaniah says, “sing aloud”, and “Rejoice and exult with all your heart”. Paul says to the Philippians, “Rejoice in the Lord always” – *Gaudete in domino semper* in Latin. This Sunday is also called Gaudete Sunday, just to show we can mispronounce a Latin word or four, perhaps. Gaudete is an imperative, an instruction, telling us we must rejoice. I don’t know about you, but I don’t take too kindly to being told what I must and must not do, unless I truly trust the person and their motives. Does it make you want to rejoice and be joyful just because you are instructed to feel that way? Possibly not.

And just now, with the Omicron variant of COVID spreading so quickly, and ominous signs that social gatherings need to be curtailed to protect others in our community, let alone ourselves, can we rejoice?

And then we come to our gospel reading! When I started reading it, I thought there wasn’t much to rejoice about for those who had journeyed on foot into the desert to hear John the Baptist and to be baptised by him. He called them a brood of vipers. John certainly wasn’t looking for the popular vote, seeking to massage the egos and flatter all those who came flocking to him.

John told them to bear fruits worthy of repentance. They were harsh words, but words that in those harsh times, were not rejected by the hearers. They must have been words they needed to hear, authentic words that spoke to them. Maybe harsh words can be a reason to rejoice, then?

Great crowds came to hear John the Baptist and we know he had a reputation for not mincing his words, whether it was to Herod or to the Pharisees and teachers of the Law of Moses, or the common man and woman.

It is interesting that the crowd responded to his exhortation to “bear fruits worthy of repentance”, by asking “What then should we do?”.

“What then should we do?” A question asked in all humility by people who valued the honesty of John the Baptist, and perhaps saw in themselves a tree that had not always born good fruit, as John described some of them. They were open to teaching and a time of reflection and repentance. That must be worth rejoicing, surely?

This reading throws us a similar challenge, as we are encouraged in Advent to undertake some honest self-examination in preparation for the arrival of our Lord and saviour. “What then should we do?”

John’s answer is really interesting. He doesn’t invite them all to get their own camel hair clothes and join him in the desert, eating honey and locusts. That was his unique ministry. He describes the things that they should be doing; things they could be doing as part of their everyday lives, in their own communities, in their own backyard.

John describes a way of living where people are observant and see the world as it is, not as they want it to be. He describes a way of living where people see what needs done, and do the simple and the right things, living generously. He describes a way of living where people live in the present moment, are grounded in their

community, and know that all the ground is holy, not just the desert sands, but the ground beneath their feet where God was and is. For we all stand on holy ground.

As an example, John tells them that it is as simple as tax collectors only collecting the taxes due and soldiers being content with their daily wages and not extorting money and food from people.

John isn't describing deeply spiritual powers, or gifts beyond the ability of the people he is talking to. He is asking them to be honest, to act with mercy and justice, and just use the gifts God has uniquely given to each one of them. John is making it clear that there is nothing mundane about how we live our lives; God rejoices when we live as God knows we can, using our God-given potential to bring heaven to earth. God has given us the gifts we need, in our simple everyday lives, to be partners with God in kingdom work.

God cares how we live our lives. Your life is so dear and precious to God. Your life is an integral part of God's goodness, bringing healing and salvation, bringing redemption. That, surely, must be worth rejoicing?

John describes the actions of Jesus; a winnowing-fork in his hand to clear the threshing floor. This a description of judging. But I don't see this as a terrifying judgement. To judge means to see clearly, to truly know something as it is, and this is certainly what Jesus came to do and did so with every person he encountered. Jesus did not offer condemnation, but compassion and love for all those he met during his ministry. He saw into each person's heart and mind and loved them. Maybe wielding the winnowing fork is an instrument of Jesus's love for us; to help separate all that is good and full of light in our lives from those things that aren't? Isn't that worth rejoicing?

Jesus knows us, knows us for who we are, and has mercy, compassion and love for us.

Living in the eternal and steadfast love of God, how should each of us respond when we hear John the Baptist say, “Bear fruits worthy of repentance.”

What can we do, and rejoice in it?  
For this is the day that the Lord has made.  
Let us rejoice and be glad in it.