



St Paul's Anglican Parish of Ipswich

SUNDAY SERMON

Sermon on the 3rd Sunday of Advent

Delivered by Rev'd Steve McMahon on the 16th December 2018

Rejoice – I say again, Rejoice! St. Paul's letter to the Philippians has been called the Epistle of Joy, because, central to it is the fact that we should pray with joy – the two are linked. We should pray for those we are joyful for, and we should be joyful for those we have prayed for!

St. Paul amplifies that in today's reading. Twice, Paul uses the word rejoice. It's as if saying it the once is not enough. But more than that, having said it once reminds Paul what he has to rejoice about. At the time of writing, St. Paul was almost certainly languishing in prison awaiting certain death and this new church at Phillipi with its Christian congregation were just setting out on their way. Persecutions for those early Christians lay ahead - persecutions which Paul knew all too well, for he had been both on the receiving end and on the distributing end prior to his conversion on the road to Damascus.

Despite that, Paul says to that young church that he has thought everything through and that despite all that will happen it is something to rejoice about. The joy of the Christian should be independent of the joys on earth because at the end of it lies fulfilment with Christ. True, in following the calling the Christian may find many hardships ahead, but the Christian knows that they can be endured because they are working to the greater glory of God. It is far harder to ignore God's calling than to accept it for what it is. Many people struggle against their true calling, and find life hard because they have a continual battle inside – I know from experience. We worry that they will not manage in this new life because they are so dependant upon the trapping that secular life gives. However, it is far better to accept the role that God actually has in store and to cope with the difficulties that it will present than to fight against the will of God.

Think of the early disciples, how much they had to give up in order to follow Jesus. They knew hardship, struggle, pain and yet they still followed Him because they recognised that his words were those of eternal life. And at the end of their lives they were still filled with joy because they knew that they were destined for the eternal presence of Christ.

Think of two people deeply in love – they are happy to be in each other's presence no matter where they are because they are together. It is like that with the Christian. The Christian is happy because he or she knows that they are in the presence and love of Christ – what do their surroundings and physical entrapments matter?

When it comes to physical entrapments, there can be few mentioned in the Bible who had less than John the Baptist. Living on locusts and wild honey, and wearing garments formed out of camel hair, he embodied the abandonment of all things physical and proclaimed a message that was truly spiritual.

We saw John's arrival last week, an arrival some six centuries since the prophets like Zephaniah, who had proclaimed messages of destruction (though today's reading from that prophet comes from the end of his short book, when he sings of the joy that will be found once the Jewish nation has, once again, found favour with God). John's message is a lot more like those passages earlier in the prophecies of Zephaniah, full of doom and gloom and predicting terrible things to come.

Indeed, it is sometimes interesting to compare John the Baptist with Jesus to see how different the two of them were. John had lived for a large part of his life in the desert whereas Jesus was a city-dweller; having been brought up in Nazareth. John ended his ministry as Jesus started His. But most startlingly, John's message was not a gospel - not a message of Good News; but one of terror and tribulation. It was a message of despair at the things that would happen to man if he didn't repent rather than a message of the good things that would happen if he did.

It is a fact of life that bad news is more newsworthy than good news. How often are our newspaper headlines filled with disaster stories - wars, famines, earthquakes, murders, accidents - rather than of good news stories - births, marriages, achievements and such like? We take great interest in the things macabre and yet don't find those things pleasant quite as interesting. The band, "Genesis" once sang a song about a brutal murder which contained the line "You never did see such a terrible thing as was seen last night on the TV. Maybe if we're lucky they will show it again such a terrible thing to see." which summed up this attraction we have with bad news.

Possibly this was part of the reason the crowds were initially attracted towards John the Baptist. However, his message was a lot more powerful and pointed the way to true salvation better than any of them could have expected.

The Jewish nation believed (and still believes) that it is the chosen people; that salvation was theirs by right. They believed that God would judge other nations by one standard and themselves by another; indeed, a Son of Abraham was exempt from judgement. John pointed out the fundamental fact that privilege meant nothing. We are not judged according to birthright but according to what we believe and do. This is at the very heart of John's statement that the people should produce fruits to match their repentance. John's message for salvation had three major foci:

It stated that we should share with each other. We are very lucky in the first world that, in the main, we have everything we need to live. However, our neighbours in Africa, South America and so on scratch out an existence. Do we help them? We hear people say that they aren't giving to charity because they did last year. Do they decide that they aren't going to have their dinner because they ate yesterday? - No! Famine hasn't gone away from us just because we are not currently seeing "people dying on my television". The problem hasn't gone away and will never go away. But that doesn't mean we can simply ignore it. John knew that and stated that we should share with our fellow man. John preached a message of social justice - God is not content with those who are content to have too much while others have too little.

Secondly, John stated that you don't need to change occupation but should be doing your job fairly. Tax collectors were to be fair in the amount of tax they collected. Soldiers were to be good soldiers. It is the duty of all of us to serve God where he puts us. There is no reason why we can't be evangelists to his message in our workplace. Okay, I'm not advocating we should stand up on our commuter trains proclaiming the word of the Lord, but we should not be afraid to stand up for what we believe when the situation arises. Additionally, we are being hypocritical in our employment if we are content to usurp our position whilst proclaiming that we believe in a God to whom fairness is paramount.

Thirdly, John was quite content that he was only the forerunner. With the number of people clamouring to hear him, he could have fallen foul of his own statements had he become proud of the work he had done. It is a dangerous thing, to stand in a pulpit and preach because there is always the temptation to seek gratification in the words we have spoken. We should not seek self-gratification in proclaiming the word of the Lord because they are not our words but his. John knew the difference, that what he was preaching came not from his own cleverness, but from God.

John the Baptist lived in the desert, where a spark could start a brush fire. In such circumstances, the snakes, the vipers, would come scuttling out of their nests looking for safety. When John preached about the fires of damnation that would come to those who didn't repent, the people similarly scurried from the fires of hell to him. John did not preach platitudes but preached the truth. He understood the same thing that Archbishop Michael Ramsey did when he once said: "The duty of the church is to comfort the disturbed and to disturb the comfortable".