

Reflection- Lasting joy

Pastor Seng Eng's sermon from 12/12/21 Advent 3

It's only 13 days to Christmas- have you sent off your Christmas cards yet? I work in an aged care facility and many of the residents like to give me a Christmas card. Because I'm the 'holy' person there, the cards I get don't usually feature Santa or Rudolf, but they tend to be more 'religious'. Nativity scenes are popular, as are the Three Kings, or angels, and the star of Bethlehem and even shepherds watching their flocks by night.

Over the years, I have received hundreds of cards. But I have never received one featuring John the Baptist. Can you imagine it? John the Baptist in his camel hair coat, with a speech bubble saying 'Happy Christmas, you brood of vipers. Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance!' What about that for a Christmas greeting!

But before we get to Christmas, there is first Advent. Before we get to the celebration, we have this time of *preparation*. Yes, Advent is a time of eager anticipation and looking forward to Christmas, but it is also a time for reflection on our lives and repentance, turning back to God. When John calls his hearers a 'brood of vipers', he is warning them against hypocrisy. Don't ask for baptism unless you are sincere, don't say you want to welcome God's Messiah unless you are prepared to change your lives to bear fruits worthy of repentance. In other words, are you serious about your faith?

Before we look at today's passage from Luke, I would like to reflect on the theme of joy, and then to make the connection with today's reading.

Let me tell you about a conversation I had recently. When someone is admitted to the facility where I am the Pastoral Practitioner, I try to meet them soon after admission to introduce myself and try to find out a little about them, their life history, their family, the interests, their religious affiliation, if any.

A new lady had been admitted to the facility where I work. I'll call her Anne. The day after she arrived, I knocked on Anne's door. She welcomed me in and was happy to tell me about herself. The conversation turned to her family. She told me about her two daughters, and their husbands and her 5 grandchildren. And then, quite naturally she asked me about *my* children, where they lived and what they were doing and so on. I said my son, Fred, was a physiotherapist and that my daughter, Sabina, was a police officer.

When I said that Sabina was a police officer, Anne's eyes widened, and she said: 'The police! My goodness! Are you *happy* about that?' I must admit that I was a little startled by the bluntness of the question. What did she mean? Anne went on say: It's such a dangerous job. Especially for a woman! They have to deal with all kinds of criminals and nasty situations. As a mother, wasn't I afraid that Sabina might get hurt? Was I happy about her choice of career?

Now, Sabina and I are very close. Before she joined the police, she had been working in an office job. She had an apartment in St Leonards and she came to dinner with us every weekend, and life was going along smoothly. Her job paid well and was challenging but I knew she was restless and looking for something that would be more satisfying. She wanted to make a difference with her life. So after much thought and making careful enquiries, she decided that she would join the police. She said that having more women in the police might influence the culture positively, make it less 'macho' and more caring.

So she applied to join and was accepted. She quit her job, gave up the lease on her apartment and went to the Police Academy in Goulburn, where among other things, she learnt how to fire a gun and deploy a taser, how to tackle a fleeing suspect down to the ground, and how to knock on the door of a house to deliver the news to the occupants that their family member has died in a road accident. She spent a lot of time doing exercises to strengthen her grip. Why? So that in a hand-to-hand fight, a suspect would not be able to snatch her gun away from her.

Recently, we have seen in the news anti-lockdown protestors attacking police. I think, as Australians, we would have found those scenes confronting, as we are not used to seeing our police facing mob violence. As I watched those scenes, I couldn't help thinking of Sabina and hoping that she would never be caught up in such a situation

So, back to the question I was asked: Was I happy that Sabina was in the police? That she had left her good job, to take a pay cut and to expose herself to all sorts of danger and potential trauma as a cop on the beat? Well, as a mother who dotes on her child, I am not exactly 'happy'.

But as mother who has raised her children to believe that we are all born for a purpose, and that is to make the world a better place, to love and serve one another, I am deeply humbled and grateful that Sabina has chosen this path, even if at times, it is not an easy one.

You know, we all do our best to bring up our children. But how they turn out is very much out of our control.

Today, we have lit the Advent candle of joy. Now joy is not the same as happiness. Happiness is something more superficial I think, depending on our circumstances, on whether life is going well, on whether we are getting what we want. And whereas I am not exactly *happy* that Sabina has joined the police, I choose to rejoice.

I have found Paul's words to the Philippian church really helpful: 'Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ... The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.'

Let's turn to the gospel reading: last week, we heard about John the Baptist telling people to prepare the way for the Lord. In this week's reading John continues in the style of a 'fire and brimstone' prophet, addressing the crowd that had come out to see him: 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?' In other words, John is warning them that they must prepare to face judgement. He told the crowd, 'Don't just say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor.' Don't be complacent, just because you have the right pedigree, just because you belong to the in-crowd. If John was speaking to us today, he might say, 'Don't think you're OK, just because you come to church every Sunday!'

John tells them that they need to bear fruits *worthy of repentance*. Even now, he says, the ax is lying at the root of the trees; and every tree that does not bear *good fruit* will be cut down and thrown into the fire. And these words apply as much to us as to John's hearers. Are we bearing good fruit? Or is it the ax for us? Not such a comfortable thought, is it?

Yet the gospel writer Luke closes this grim scene by saying, "So, with many other exhortations, he (John the Baptist) proclaimed the good news to the people." What?! How is this good news?

When John's hearers were warned about the impending judgement, they must have been worried. They asked him: what then should we do? The crowds, the tax collectors and the soldiers ask: what should we do? What can we do to avoid God's judgement?

It is interesting that Luke mentions particularly tax collectors and soldiers. Why mention them? If you know anything about Jewish society at the time, you must know that the tax collectors and the Roman soldiers were despised and hated, because they represented the authorities who oppressed the people. In the tradition of God's prophets, John speaks truth to power, calling out their abuses of power.

To the tax collectors, John's instruction is simply this: collect no more than the amount prescribed for you. In other words, take only what is fair. To the soldiers, 'do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages. In other words, don't bully or throw your weight around. I wonder, if Luke was writing his gospel today, who might he have John the Baptist mentioning in particular? Who are present-day authority figures who might be abusing their power? Hmmm...Wouldn't you love to see John the Baptist standing up in Federal Parliament and calling out bad behaviour?

And what about the crowds, the ordinary folk? What do they have to do to avoid God's judgement? John's instruction to them is also simple: 'If you have two coats, share with the one who has none. If you have food, share with those who don't have food.' In other words, share what you have. *It's not that difficult.*

'Repentance' is not that difficult. And it is within the reach of all of us, whatever our circumstances. Share what you have, be fair, don't bully. Tax collectors can continue collecting taxes, but fairly. Soldiers can continue soldiering but don't abuse

their powers. As for the rest of us, share what we have with those who have nothing. Wherever we are, we *can* bear fruit worthy of repentance in how we treat others as we go about our ordinary everyday lives. It's not that difficult. And *this* is the good news.

John the Baptist was a prophet telling people to repent, to change their ways so as to prepare the way for God's kingdom to enter the world. In our age, we also have our prophets. Both David Attenborough and Greta Thunberg have devoted themselves to speaking the truth about the how we are treating the planet, speaking truth to power and also to us ordinary folk that we need to repent, to change our ways, so as to usher in a better world. I was moved by Sir David's hope that people are beginning to see that 'self-interest is for the past, common interest is for the future.' This is the only hope for the human race, if we learn to share what we have.

In my work as a pastoral practitioner in aged care, I hear many sad stories. People tell me how their health is failing and they can't even look after themselves. People tell me about broken relationships within their families. Sometimes, husband and wife are separated because one of them has to go to a nursing home. Sometimes, a child dies before her parents. In this world, *happiness doesn't last*.

But the good news is that whatever our personal circumstances, we can still learn to live more faithfully, bearing fruit worthy of repentance. God continues to extend grace to us. God will not forsake us but continues to send us prophets to call us to a better way of living. And so, as Paul says in our reading from Philippians: We can rejoice in the Lord. Always. Worldly happiness may not last, but joy in the Lord is a joy that transcends our circumstances.

In 13 days, we will celebrate Christmas. We will celebrate the birth of the one called Emmanuel, God with us. God *is* with us. May that bring you hope, a hope that does not disappoint. May that bring you peace, the peace that surpasses all understanding. May that bring you joy, joy that lasts. Amen