

Intro the theme

Recently I listened to a programme on Radio 4 Extra called “Captured by pirates” [available on BBC Sounds]. I didn’t intend to listen to it but it was a gripping half hour. It told the true story of a group of missionary children in China who were travelling by boat to the Inland Mission School with their teachers. The parents were working as missionaries around China, hundreds of miles away. The children, some as young as 7, would see their parents just once a year.

During this journey, their boat was hijacked by pirates and they were held hostage for days until they were spotted and rescued by the RAF and Royal Navy near Hong Kong. That in itself was a remarkable story but it didn’t end there. When WW2 started, life carried on as normal at the school until Pearl Harbour. The Japanese invaded the region and the children and staff were firstly confined to the school and then moved to a prison camp, where Eric Liddell was also held. Although they didn’t experience the brutality that other PoWs went through, it was still a great trial. They had a physical enemy all around them, but also potential enemies within: disease, loneliness, despair. They didn’t see their parents for years, some had no contact at all. The programme tells the story of how their teachers cared for them and provided a healthy routine with Brownies, sports and classes, protecting them as much as possible.

What struck me was how the interviewees were able to recall the time without bitterness and with many happy memories. It could not be explained by the teachers’ care on its own. Two moments struck me particularly: one woman recalled Eric Liddell’s kindness to the children and was moved by his favourite hymn:

Be still, my soul; the Lord is on thy side;
bear patiently the cross of grief or pain.
Leave to thy God to comfort and to shield you
in every change He faithful will remain.
Be still, my soul; thy best, thy heav'nly Friend
through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.

And an American woman recalled regularly singing Taps, the US equivalent of the Last Post, with these words:

Day is done, Gone the sun,
From the lake, From the hill,
From the sky.
All is well, Safely rest,
God is nigh.

They were in a prison camp, surrounded by soldiers, with the risk of dysentery, hunger and despair, but they could sing “All is well, Safely rest” honestly and with joy because God was near to them, in their midst, and He would lead them from thorny ways to joy.

God in our midst

When I first read the scriptures for today, I spent some time scratching my head. I couldn't see an obvious connection between John's words about vipers and chaff and the joy of Isaiah 12. But it turned out that there are four liturgical readings for today, and as I read them light began to dawn:

- First Reading Zephaniah 3:14-20
- Canticle Isaiah 12:2-6
- Second Reading Philippians 4:4-7
- Gospel Luke 3:7-18

There is a huge amount in each of these passages, but the theme I'm picking up today is God being in our midst.

In Jewish tradition there is a parable called The King in the Field. The King's normal place is in his throne room, in his palace in the capital city surrounded by courtiers and bodyguards, and by protocol. To see him requires a reason to leave your work, maybe a long journey, definitely a good bath and putting on your best clothes, then a request at the palace which may or may not be granted and then waiting, and more waiting. Remember Queen Esther: even she couldn't approach King Xerxes of her own volition without risking her life.

But once in a while, the king would leave his palace and go out into the countryside. This was your opportunity! To see the king, to be not just allowed but encouraged to approach him and speak to him freely, not in the palace but maybe in your own town, your own fields! You may have just come from milking a goat or ploughing a field, it doesn't matter: the king is right there, smiling at you and wanting to speak to you.

This tradition is associated with the month of Elul, the last month of the Jewish year, around August time. It's a time of considering the past year, to repent of sins and fix broken relationships before the Days of Awe which culminate in Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

I don't know if John the Baptist was preaching in Elul but the message fits the theme. Matthew records John as preaching "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand": repent of your sins, put things right, fix what is broken in your attitude towards others because the King is coming into the field!

I've picked out a few key points from John's exhortation:

1) He warns the people not to rely on status or heritage to save them. They may be descendants of Abraham but that's not enough to save them if they don't repent. We may not be descendants of

Abraham, but I have friends who have no faith but had their children Christened. The ceremonial equivalent of crossing your fingers, unless it's also backed up by teaching those children about God and them then making a decision to follow Him themselves.

2)As Bernard said last week, repentance is an action, it's not just saying sorry and resolving not to do that sin again. It means turning back to God and acting in the right way, what John calls bearing fruits in keeping with repentance. Metaphors can sometimes be confusing, and the crowd asks: what shall we do? The answers were simple and practical:

- Share what you have with those in need.
- Don't be greedy or dishonest in your work.
- Don't make false accusations against people.
- Be content with what you have.

Sound familiar? Do not bear false witness, do not covet, do not steal, love the stranger in your midst because you were once strangers in Egypt. John's Good news is not an all-new wonder diet, it is a call to return to God's rules for living.

3)Even in John's day this message was not just for the Jews. Luke specifically records that soldiers were there responding to John's message. It's not explicit, but these must have been Roman soldiers because the Jews didn't have any militia, just the temple guards who were referred to as such. These soldiers were gentiles who had been brought to Judea from across the empire and who were learning to fear God. They are listening to the messenger and acting upon his words.

4)John's call to repent is urgent: he warns that the axe is already at the foot of the tree. If a fruit tree doesn't bear good fruit, there is no point in a busy gardener keeping it. The tree will be cut down and put on the fire. God gives us time to repent but that time isn't infinite: one day we will die or Jesus will come back into the field and then it will be too late to change.

5)John's ministry was popular and successful at that time. He was pulling in the crowds and raising hopes that he was the Messiah. But he was not distracted or puffed up with celebrity. He knew his role and status and was determined not to over-step that. Maybe he over-heard people whispering about him, "Is John the Messiah?", "Is he a genuine prophet?". or maybe the Holy Spirit prompted him. Either way he spelt it out in the Matthew and Luke accounts.

In the verses preceding today's passage, John quoted from Isaiah 40. His Jewish listeners would have picked up on this reference, following John's train of thought, and they would have heard John claiming the passage about 'the voice of one calling in the wilderness, prepare the way of the LORD'. But not just that, he's also using a phrase from Isaiah 52. He doesn't quote the passage, but those

who knew the scriptures would have caught that hint and remembered it: “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.” The voice of your watchmen – they lift up their voice; together they sing for joy; for eye to eye they see the return of the LORD to Zion.”

John is saying: I’m just a voice crying in the wilderness, I’m the messenger running ahead, shouting out that the King, the Messiah, reigns and is coming into the field. He’s so much greater than I am that I’m not even fit to tie his sandals, the job of the lowliest slave.

Look, the King is coming into the field!

Luke tells us that with ‘many other exhortations [John] preached good news to the people’, but let’s look again at some of this “good news”. John doesn’t mince his words with the crowd, “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” John says that he baptises them with water, but the one who is coming – the King, the Messiah - will baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire. This is not a social visit, the king is coming to deal with the harvest.



Threshing above left; winnowing with forks above right

The King will thresh his harvest to break up the stalks. Then he will pick up his winnowing fork and stand on the threshing floor with the wind behind him, tossing the harvest in to the air, watching as the grain falls close by him and the chaff blows away. The grain is the precious crop, every grain will be gathered up and put in his storehouses. The straw can be used for animal feed or bedding, but the chaff? It has no value, it can’t be eaten, it’s useless for bedding, all it’s good for is the fire.

I grew up in Peterborough and in October there was always mud on the roads, smoke in the distance and a peculiar smell in the air as the sugar beet was harvested and turned into sugar. At the end of the harvest, the stubble in the fields was burnt. Fires would be set at points around the field and slowly spread across the field, with clouds of thick smoke and a trail of black ash.

Images of burning chaff and stubble were used by several prophets as an image of judgement. These images would have been in the minds of John's hearers who knew the scriptures. It sometimes signified God judging sinful nations, but it also relates to the final day when God will judge the earth. Malachi says in chapter 4, "For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch." This is what John is reminding people.

Zephaniah matches John's urgency, warning the Jews in chapter 1 that "The great day of the LORD is near, near and hastening fast...A day of wrath is that day...a day of clouds and thick darkness." And he warns the gentiles as well in chapter 2, "Gather together, yes gather, O shameless nation, before the decree [that is God's judgement] takes effect – before the day passes away like chaff – before there comes upon you the burning anger of the LORD...seek righteousness, seek humility, perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the anger of the LORD."

So yay! The King is coming into the field, His great day of wrath is coming. Woo yeah! Good news? For many it will be a truly terrible day, a day of torment and despair. Having ignored or rejected the King all their lives, maybe having denied His very existence, they will come face to face with Him and it will be too late to change how they lived.

So where is the good news? Firstly, it's not too late! The messenger is calling but the King is not yet here. Repent now, bear fruit of righteousness now!

Secondly, the King knows sin is a big, a huge, an overwhelming problem for us. He knows we're weak so He's provided three supports: His Word, His Holy Spirit and Prayer. He may not be a physical presence standing in front of us in our field – not yet! - but He's made ways for us to talk to Him and hear from Him.

Thirdly, He has already made the way for us to be saved: Jesus's death and resurrection. This is not just for the Jews but for everyone. I mentioned how John quoted from both Isaiah 40 and 52. The passage from Isaiah 40 ends "And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." But John doesn't finish with those words, he uses a phrase from Isaiah 52 v 10: "And all the ends of the earth shall see The salvation of our God." Why did he do this? Because the King is not just bringing wrath, He's also offering salvation.

I'm learning Biblical Hebrew, and I've realised just how rusty my language learning brain cells have got. It has a completely different alphabet to English, different grammar and a different attitude to words. It has a smaller vocabulary than English, but words are made to work hard. One of my favourite words so far is 'af' "אף" which means nostril or anger depending on the context.

At this time of year, we read the accounts of Jesus' birth and remember the angel appearing to Joseph encouraging him to marry Mary "She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." In Hebrew, Jesus' name is Yeshua "ישוע", yod-shin-vav-ayin, which means salvation.

In my preparation, I looked up our second passage, Isaiah 12 v 2-6, in Hebrew. Isaiah prophesies to Judah that when the Messiah comes, they will say:

"Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the LORD God is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation." With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation...'

ב הִנֵּה אֵל יְשׁוּעָתִי אֲבֹטָח, וְלֹא אֶפְחָד: כִּי-עָזִי וְזַמְרָת יְהוָה, וַיְהִי-לִי לִישׁוּעָה.

ג וַשְּׂאֲבָתֶם-מִיָּמִים, בְּשִׂשׁוֹן, מִמַּעַיְנֵי הַיְשׁוּעָה.

In Hebrew this is: Hinneh el y'shua-tee evtah v'lo efchad: ki-azi vezim-rat Adonai va-yehi-li lyshuah vushavtem besashon mi-ma-ayeni ha yeshuah.

Every time salvation is mentioned, it is Jesus' name!

With joy you will draw water from the wells of Yeshua. I wonder if this came to the minds of the worshippers at the Temple during the festival when Jesus stood up and cried out "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. ³⁸ Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" Or perhaps the people in Samaria remembered it when the woman rushed from the well to call them to hear Jesus, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

It's the same in the lectionary passage from Zephaniah, 3 v 14-17 "The LORD has taken away the judgements against you...Fear not, O Zion;...The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save", gibbor Yoshua, a mighty one – Yeshua.

So what now? There has been the call to repent, the call to bear fruit and the gift of salvation, the way of escape from the coming wrath. Is it just an escape route? For some perhaps, the 11th hour, death bed change, like the thief on the cross.

But the wrath isn't the end of the story. When the judgement has finished, the King will gather his people together, both Jews and God-fearing gentiles. What a day! Zephaniah says that in that day, people will rejoice and celebrate their salvation with all their hearts, they shall never again fear evil. But that's not all, the King Himself will rejoice over us. This mighty one, God in our midst, "will rejoice over us with gladness; He will quiet us by his love; He will exult over us with loud singing". Our King will take away our shame and replace it with honour.

The humble who repent, the righteous, will still go through the threshing and winnowing process. Throughout our lives there will be tough times before we are gathered safely into the storehouse. As Bernard talked about last week, God refines us like a goldsmith refines gold using the difficulties that we face to bring our impurities to the surface. Personally, I would prefer to skip the threshing floor and the Day of Wrath and just go straight for the joy, but that's not how it works.

In the final passage in the lectionary, Philippians 4, Paul makes it clear that we are called to endure trials and tribulations in this life. But, unlike Malachi and Zephaniah, Paul knew that the King, the Messiah had already come and will come again, so we can be joyful *right now* and we can approach the King through prayer *right now*.

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵ Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. **The Lord is at hand**; ⁶ do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

So what can we take away from this

- The Lord is at hand! The mighty King is coming into the field!
- Do not be complacent: bear fruit in keeping with repentance. Heritage/status can't save us.
- We will go through the threshing and winnowing. It may be painful and hard but it's necessary. God is the farmer, the gardener, the goldsmith. Let Him do His work.
- Do not be anxious, let His peace guard your heart and mind.
- The King wants us to rejoice now and always.
- He has made a way for us to approach Him so we can pray with thanksgiving, knowing that He will hear our requests.

In the end, if we do not give up, He will bring us safely into His storehouses. No more fear, no more pain. The Day of the LORD will be a day of joy, gladness, healing, total security, and love. Can the things we hold on to, the sin that tempts us, our fear or suffering really compare with that?