Gaudete Sunday,

A day when the solemnity and the penitential nature of Advent is replaced with a sense of joy.

I felt that joy the other day when I was preparing the orders of service for Christmas.

I put some Christmas songs on my iphone

And for the first time I felt really Christmassy.

And then I turned to today’s sermon and read the Gospel for today.

And suddenly I felt really depressed.

Just when we’re looking forward to Christmas,

Just when we’re getting excited, suddenly we encounter this difficult block of teaching from John the Baptist.

A teaching that seems somewhat at odds with the joy that is meant to be felt today.

So, you might want to look at the reading in your orders of service.

Luke 3.7-18

John the Baptist’s teachings follow the wider theme of repentance that we’ve been exploring for the last couple of weeks.

Last week and the week before, Susi and I looked at what repentance was:

A letting go, a turning aside, a return to God.

And I don’t know about you, but in the middle of all this excitement about Christmas, focusing on repentance can feel we’re brought back down to earth with a bump.

But of course the reading is meant to do precisely that,

As one scholar puts it *“Faithful and fruitful arrival at the manger will be possible only after the careful self-examination and recommitment called for by John.”*

Christianity is a wonderful faith,

The hope and salvation and the love of Christ outweighs everything.

But it is not an easy faith:

There is a reason Christ told us to take up our crosses and follow him.

The way of the Messiah is not always a comfortable one.

Are we too comfortable?

And I ask that as it’s interesting to note who John is talking to:

Verse 7 says ‘he said to the **crowd** who came out to be baptized by him.’

The keyword there is **the crowd.**

He’s not just addressing the onlookers, or the scoffers,

He’s actually addressing those who **want** to hear the message and who believe they belong.

And he insults them: “you brood of vipers!”

Talk about getting their attention!

Imagine if I suddenly started a sermon by calling you who wish to belong,

a brood of vipers!

(Don’t worry, I’m nice, I won’t do that!)

But it begs the question as why John is criticising these people who have turned up?

Isn’t he insulting the very people he should be commending?

Well, he says:

‘do not begin to say to yourselves “we have Abraham as our ancestor”

He is criticising them because they think that they’re OK simply because they are the descendents of Abraham.

God’s chosen people,

All they need to do is turn up, get baptized and all is OK.

Actually, John goes onto say that ‘God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham’

As St. Paul will explain later in Romans 9-11, God’s promises have been widened,

The descendants of Abraham are more than just those of that bloodline.

But for John, even turning up for baptism is not enough.

What is key is ‘’bearing fruits worthy of repentance.’’

What is key is that repentance leads to a changed nature and a **generosity of spirit,**

For John,

How we handle our riches and material wealth,

How we live with neighbours

Those fruits of our repentance,

Those are the things that truly matter.

Saint Augustine once said of this passage that ‘*repentance will not appear to be of much use to us if works of mercy do not accompany.’*

That’s a challenge.

But note what John says:

“whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none”

“Whoever has food must do likewise.”

It’s not a call to give **everything,** it’s a call to do away with the excess.

That’s what repentance is: a return back to only that which matters.

And at Christmas, with all its excess and waste, that is a timely message.

Now, this presents another challenge to us:

Does this mean that we earn our place in God’s Kingdom?

If you know anything of church history, a big part of the reformation was the argument about the nature of salvation,

Luther had that amazing moment of clarity where he knew he was saved not by what he did, but by God’s grace.

The reading today risks if we’re not careful of speaking against that.

What it’s actually doing for us is highlighting the need to be transformed.

And the risk is we get too comfortable.

We risk saying ‘I’m saved by grace thank you very much. I don’t need to do anything.’

Just like the people of John’s day believing they were OK because they were descendents of Abraham.

What John is saying is that the of our discipleship is that transformed and generous life.

Living a life in line with that amazing calling that we have answered by virtue of our baptism.

In verse 16 John speaks about baptism.

In a baptism, one of the things we do is anoint with oil.

A mark that reminds us that we are forever owned by God,

And that, enabled and strengthened by the Holy Spirit, we are given a new course in life.

The oil will fade and I describe it as an invisible badge.

Actually, it should always be visible.

As Christians, our goal is for that mark of who we are and what we believe to be visible

As Matthew’s Gospel records Jesus saying ‘let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to your father in heaven.’

This is what John is speaking to us today about: being true to that transformed life into which we have been baptised and into which we are being called.

Now, please: don’t feel guilty.

I know everytime I don’t do what John commands

I feel guilt. And remorse.

We are human, and we will fail.

But this is why repentance is so important:

We recognise when we have messed up and we re-orient ourselves.

We re-commit.

As I said last week, repentance is a gradual and continuous thing,

Throughout our lives.

And that is why constant and ongoing repentance is needed,

It’s why we start our Eucharist with confession.

We **must** constantly repent,

And allow ourselves to be drawn back to God.

So, that’s all good. But, it’s Gaudete Sunday, where is the joy?

Well it’s there.

Contained hidden within John’s message of living a generous and humble life.

Although, of that message, we might, ‘well anyone can tell us to be nicer. Peace, love and goodwill to humankind – isn’t that true for everyone? It’s not limited to Christians.’

But look again!

Look at verses 7-9:

John is convinced of the coming of the Kingdom,

His teaching is not from some moralistic desire to be nicer to everyone,

It comes from a deep rooted certainty that the Kingdom is coming,

His teaching is not just ethical,

It is, to use a theological word, eschatological:

Eschatology is the area of theology focused on the last things,

The coming of God’s Kingdom.

John’s teaching is ethical precisely **because** the Kingdom of God is ethical.

Justice, fairness and equality are at the heart of the coming Kingdom.

The coming Kingdom that John speaks of is a world that turns upside down the wrongs and unfairness of this world,

To paraphrase Zepheniah in the first reading, the world that is coming sees the lame saved, the outcast gathered, shame turned to praise.

And there is the joy.

There is the thing to celebrate today.

The joy is that this wonderful kingdom that John knows is coming

Will dawn in two weeks in the manger.

And that it will arrive fully one day in glory.

We don’t know when, which is why we must stay alert,

But we know that it *is* coming.

And in a world where injustice seems rife,

Where the marginalised are pushed ever further to the recesses,

Where more and more people are on our streets,

That is news to rejoice in.

That is news that should transform our lives at the core.

The Messiah is coming.

Rejoice and be glad.

Amen.

**Rev. James Pacey**