

Sermon for 8th December 2024 - Year C – Advent 2

Preached at St Serf's Shettleston

Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

Sermon

The second Sunday of Advent continues the theme of waiting and anticipation, but this time we are invited – or more accurately, exhorted – to spend our time in fervent preparations for the coming of Christ.

Our Old Testament reading from the prophet Malachi tells us that God will send a messenger to prepare the way before him, who will be like a refining fire or a cleansing soap. In the Christian tradition, this prophecy is fulfilled by John the Baptist, who went into all the regions around the Jordan river, calling people to repentance – to change their way of thinking and their way of life – in preparation for the arrival of Jesus.

Some people have made preparing for guests into an art form. They vacuum and dust from top to bottom, scrub the bathroom and toilet, spend hours selecting drinks and nibbles, and prepare multiple meal variations in case of unexpected dietary requirements. Some even clean the house in preparation for their cleaner to arrive, otherwise *what will they think?*

Now, I'm not sure that John the Baptist was the sort of person who would have appreciated these sorts of preparations. He did famously live in the desert, wear hair shirts and eat locusts, for example. However, he was certainly calling for us to make preparation in our hearts for the coming of Jesus. Just as a fastidious homemaker looks around their house and sees all the things that need tidying before the honoured guest arrives, so John is inviting us to look around at our lives and see if we are in a fit state to welcome the Lord and Creator of All.

John's role is to make us uncomfortable with how things are, to make us notice things we don't want to notice, which is why we often like to skip quickly past him and on to choirs of angels and goodwill to all people, with God appearing as a harmless and delightful baby.

Talking about John the Baptist 18 days before Christmas is a bit confusing however, since John was still only a baby when Jesus was born, and he won't be out there calling for anyone's repentance for another 30 years. But let's not worry about that – John's point is that our hearts need preparation in order to receive the message that Jesus brings. Our soil needs tilling and weeding so that the seeds of love, compassion, justice, mercy and forgiveness can take root.

Personally, I must admit I prefer to preach about the transforming power of the love of God, rather than admonishing us to repent and try harder to be good. There's only so much spiritual work we can really do by our own strength.

Instead, a profound experience of God's love for us can be so overwhelming that it transforms our entire way of thinking about ourselves and others in positive ways. It is like being helicoptered up to the top of Mount Everest by God's grace, rather than climbing every step by our own feeble strength. It may feel like cheating, but most of us have no other way than humbly asking God to transform our hearts, because we simply cannot do it ourselves.

This transformation is God's baptism of refining fire, that miraculously burns away our grudges, our bitterness, our anger, all the things that we accrue over a lifetime of painful experience and regret, leaving us suddenly free to love others. Scales fall from our eyes and we immediately see other people as God sees them, our minds no longer clouded by our own painful memories and suffering.

So, my goal as a preacher and priest has often been to point to God's love, to try to encourage us to seek it, to imagine it, to meditate on it and contemplate

it, because none of us know what might trigger that sudden revelation or conversion that is so overwhelming and profound that everything else in life fades in the background.

The question that's always hung there, unanswered, in my mind, is what is the role of human effort in this inner transformation we all long for? One of the goals of our faith is to become more like Jesus, more compassionate, more loving, less selfish. But how do we actually do that? John will tell us to repent and prepare ourselves so that God's love can take root in our hearts, but what does that mean, in practice? We can't make ourselves saints by our own efforts, and neither can we summon God's grace to transform us, so what on earth can we do?

Well, I think we can be pretty sure that it's not about becoming stricter and more judgemental, more vocal and urgent in our moral criticism of the way others live their lives. John the Baptist's vocation may have been to call the privileged to account, speaking truth to power, but even he wasn't telling everyone to be like John the Baptist.

Perhaps a quick look at our epistle reading might help us. Paul, writing to the Philippians, tells this community that he loves, "this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God".

Paul is talking about a transformation that starts with love for one another, which overflows into acts of charity and kindness, which results in knowledge and insight, which then leads to purity and blamelessness for the glory and praise of God. We don't start at the end by trying to be pure and blameless, attempting to be perfect on day one. If we try, we're just going to feel awful about ourselves and give up.

Instead, I think our repentance, our preparation for God transforming our lives, involves two sorts of effort on our part. The first is, as Paul says, to love one another with acts of kindness, forgiveness and compassion, choosing to put another person's wellbeing before our own comfort and pleasure. This is something we always have the power to choose to do. We can't be perfect, but we can in each moment choose to forgive and show compassion rather than judge and be critical. Every time we do this is an act of repentance and humility.

The second thing we can do is to regularly turn our attention back to God. The old mystics called it 'recollection' – disconnecting from our busyness to refocus ourselves on God's presence and love. Just a 30 second prayer every so often throughout the day will do it. "Dear God, thank you for my life; thank you for your love for me; help me to love others as you have loved me, Amen."

These are simple things, but so is digging soil and sowing seeds. Gardening is hard work, but God is the head gardener, and it is God who makes our tiny seeds grow into a garden of love, and we are his beloved children who try to help but generally make a bit of a mess of things, which God quietly clears up while we're distracted elsewhere.

Eventually we may come to realise that not only are we blessed to be sharing in the gardening with God, but we also are that garden – we are the harvest of love that God has made.

What did we do? We were simply ourselves. We were the beautiful rose; we grew, and flourished, and we opened our petals for the Son. And God loved us.