

Advent - Sunday number three; the Sunday of Joy. Candles - check. Tree - check. Unreasonable sense of anticipation - check. Presents wrapped and meal plans made... well, maybe not quite yet. Malls crowded and favourite Christmas music on repeat - obviously. Nearly everywhere else, the arrival of Christmas has been acknowledged - even embraced. So please explain, Mr Lackie, why we are still trudging around with John the Baptist? Let's get on with Christmas!

Am I just a scrooge in a gown and stole - prolonging this 'advent' nonsense out of some perverted sense of superiority? I have, after all, been rather stubborn about the need for Advent as a distinct season - certain hymns - a pattern of readings - a habit that I really believe is necessary to properly prepare us as the people of God to celebrate the birth of our Saviour. And John the baptizer plays an important part in that preparation.

John's is the voice that sets the stage - strengthens Jesus' connection with the prophets of liberation - with Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah and Zephaniah, among others. John demands repentance - and gets it - from the people who flock to the sound of his voice. John's abrupt and often harsh proclamation is used by Jesus as a starting point.

Jesus is the superior story-teller, and a more imaginative teacher, and he takes up John's task after Herod throws John in jail - but the core of the message remains the same.

Today's passage from Luke's gospel is actually John's shining moment; the number one sermon in John's arsenal. 'Repent, you snakes, and bear fruit that proves your repentance.' This has been his only message, but on this day, the congregation is moved to respond. It is real repentance that causes the people to ask their questions. "What should we do?"

You've convinced us, John - now help us; and John's advice sounds...well it sounds like Jesus. Share what you have - reach into your overflowing closets and cupboards and share the wealth of your abundance. To the tax collector, don't fudge the numbers; don't take more than you are owed. To the soldiers; don't resort to violent extortion; don't abuse your power; be content. Is this not the same message that Jesus offered, in dozens of different ways? Love one another - enemy and friend alike; Love God and neighbour, for this is all the law.

Sure, John puts all this in the context of hellfire and damnation; the ax at the root of the tree, the unquenchable fire - but the message is consistent with the kingdom that Jesus proclaims. Luke even calls John's tirade "good news".

But why do we need this, you still want to know. Why, on the 'Sunday of Joy', don't we hear some Joy, for heavens' sake...

Let's consider the state of our celebrations to this point: We have (historically and presently) resigned ourselves to a frenzy of buying and planning - the lights are beautiful, and the music is touching, but we've been exposed for almost a month now. The crowds at the mall are losing their patience. Some retailers are running out of stock. We were even told to 'buy early' in anticipation of 'supply chain problems...'

Tempers are short and Christmas lists are long, and no matter how often we promise ourselves that "this Christmas will be different", collectively we continue to use the season to increase the stock value of major corporations without really adding anything useful to our own lives. There are a few surprises - and some delight in the eyes of the very young, but what have we gained by launching Christmas in November?

In the church, however, certain stubborn souls have insisted on a sparser season of preparation - Advent. Our readings and reflections encourage a different perspective. We consider the coming of Christ, both as an infant and in his risen glory, as an event that frees us from all kinds of bondage, even the bondage of self-satisfied comfort

and excess. Four weeks of waiting; of careful contemplation of the consequences of committing to the kingdom of God - this is the season that prepares us to live according to the call of Christ. And John's simple, strident advice speaks to our current situation.

What would our Christmas celebrations look like if we took John at his word? If, rather than emptying store shelves of trinkets, we emptied our closets and cupboards for the good of those whose cupboards are always empty. If businesses, rather than maximizing profits at the expense of workers and consumers, decided that quality and integrity was more important than constantly rising stock dividends. What if the people entrusted with power remembered that power should serve the people; if we overturned the old playground rule of "might makes right" and sought peace and the welfare of all, without resorting to threat or violence to achieve the comfort of only a few? That would be a different sort of December, wouldn't it. John and Jesus both suggest that THAT is what the kingdom of God is like.

Christmas in the church is a late addition to the list of holidays. It is an important recognition of God's desire to be with us, to "take flesh and live among us", and as such Christmas offers a way to begin thinking about the Kingdom of God. and that kingdom is so different from what we're used to, we need time to get ready. Time to consider the hope, the peace, the joy and love that form the foundation of that new life that Jesus offers.

Next week, our thoughts turn to love - the love of a mother for her child, soon to be born - the love of God, who takes such a chance to come in the flesh - and we still won't have reached the point of miracle. Patience is needed. Preparation is important. God has changed the rules and God's love will change the world, and we are not yet ready.