

Good News?
Luke 3:7-18

A letter came in the mail this week . . . since it's addressed to all of us, I thought I'd share it with you . . . looks like a Christmas card . . . from a Mr J. Baptist. Let's open it . . .

. . . "You brood of vipers . . . produce fruit in keeping with repentance . . . don't rely on your ancestry, or traditions . . . or, the way it's always been done!"

Well . . . that's awkward. I don't think we'll put him on our Christmas card list next year! What's wrong with 'Merry Christmas'? Something a bit more positive would be nice. Whatever happened to bringing a message of hope . . . isn't that what we're after at Christmas . . . isn't that what we need? Not just us . . . but most people . . . both in the church and out . . . at Christmas we want to be reminded there is hope . . . hope for a better year ahead . . . hope for a better world ahead . . . hope for a better life ahead. So, the parties . . . the presents . . . the shopping . . . the overindulgent eating and drinking . . . are all there to lift our spirits. And, why not? Who doesn't want their spirits lifted? Who doesn't want a bit of Christmas cheer in our mixed up world? And, who wants to receive a Christmas card from a religious nutter pointing out our failings and calling us to repent? Maybe I should have left the card unopened . . . maybe next year if I see 'J. Baptist on the return address I'll post it straight back.

It was tempting to leave this text alone . . . tackle one of the other texts . . . maybe the Philippians one about rejoicing . . . that sounds more Christmasy . . . a bit easier on the ears than a rant from some ancient prophet. It's a temptation we succumb to more and more these days . . . ignore the hard words from God . . . look for the easy word. But, that's a bit like receiving a Christmas card that says: 'Seasons Greetings'! What does that mean, 'Seasons Greetings'?! Whatever else John the Baptist is, he's not bland . . . and neither is the Word of God. And, God's Word always intends to give hope . . . always . . . even through a cranky, eccentric prophet!

In the lead up to Christmas the hospital emergency wards fill up . . . the TV news is full of bad news stories . . . and, our own family conflicts are brought into sharp relief . . . and if our answer to all that is to say: "Seasons Greetings" . . . then Christmas truly is hopeless. But, here, in this text, the words of John the Baptist call to us . . . shout out to us . . . just as he shouted out physically all those years ago in the wilderness . . . they shout out to us: "Listen up!" "Something's going on here . . . something big . . . something vital . . . don't lose sight of it in amongst the tinsel and department store muzak . . . don't let the blandness of presents and parties and 'Seasons Greetings' take the focus away from what I'm pointing you to . . . a child . . . in a manger . . . and, most importantly, who that child was. The angels said to the shepherds: "Today is born for you a Saviour." A saviour! If it's a saviour, that means someone needs to be saved. Could that be what John was yelling about? Reminding us too? We need a saviour . . . realise it . . . recognise it.

There's more at stake here, then, than having a very merry Christmas . . . more than even 'peace on earth and good will to all men' . . . John's Advent cry reminds us that there's something wrong . . . we shouldn't need to be told that . . . we just have to look around us . . . but, there's more than something wrong with our world . . . there's something terminally wrong between God and human beings . . . between God and ourselves . . . something that has eternal consequences . . . something that is a matter of life and death . . . something that's worth shouting about. The relationship has broken down . . . it is irreparably damaged . . . something has to be done!

So, what can be done? Can we do something? Well, John seems to suggest we can . . . something practical . . . share what you have . . . feed the poor . . . don't rip people off . . . don't abuse the power you have for

your own gain . . . that's what we can do. All these are good things. All these have potential positive outcomes for our relationships here, but the theory and the practice in reality are two different things . . . we share what we can afford to share . . . we look for every legal loophole to avoid paying tax . . . we're rarely content with what we have . . . and, even if we could put the theory into practice none of it can mend our relationship with God . . . because God demands perfection . . . in every way! Our doing is always with mixed motives . . . our doing cannot mend the broken relationship. John's advice is good and necessary but, it's limited . . . John knew that . . . he knew he didn't have the solution . . . even his baptising was a baptism of preparation . . . preparation for what only God himself could do. So, in the end, John can only point the way . . . a way that is less about doing and more about repenting.

Repenting! Now, there's another churchy word that's gone out of style. It conjures up images of sack cloth and ashes . . . of being solemn and sorrowful, but, really, when it comes down to it, repenting is just realising we need a saviour . . . we can't do it on our own . . . we can't fix our relationship . . . we can't buy our way out of the mess . . . we can't jolly ourselves out of it with 'Seasons Greetings' . . . no, we need a saviour . . . we can't do anything except – as the cliché goes – 'let go and let God'. That's what repentance is about: letting go and letting God. Letting God save us. Trusting God to save us.

And, it takes faith – trust – because God chooses to do the saving in a rather unconventional way. Which brings us back to the importance of Christmas . . . not the shopping . . . not the parties . . . not the decorations . . . the baby in the manger . . . there's our saviour . . . that baby . . . Jesus . . . your Saviour . . . my Saviour. Just a human baby. One of us. God's son. That baby gives us hope long after the batteries in the presents have gone flat . . . that baby mends our relationship with God . . . that baby gives us and guarantees us life forever.

He's the reason Mr J. Baptist sent that Christmas card . . . yes, he's a bit rough around the edges, but he means well . . . he means for us to see our need for a Saviour . . . and to see the Saviour . . . to remember the Saviour . . . to rely on the Saviour. He means for us to have a hope that lasts, no matter what life throws at us . . . a hope that is anchored in God's gift of his Son at Christmas.

That surely is the good news John came to proclaim.

Amen.

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