

**'Glad tidings from the King of Kings.'** This is Gaudete Sunday, Rejoice Sunday, so called because Gaudete is the first word of the traditional Introit at Mass on this day. Zephaniah has certainly got the message about rejoicing and the good news he brings is unequivocal. **'The Lord your God is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival.'** But *John* doesn't really seem a great rejoicer, does he? You wouldn't, I think, pick John the Baptist if you wanted a master of ceremonies at a good party, on a day of festival. There's something almost comic about the way our Gospel passage ends. **'So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.'** Exhortations *can* be towards joy and celebration, as are Zephaniah's: Sing aloud, O daughter Zion, and exult...'. And St Paul also exhorts the Philippians, and us, to Rejoice - in words used in that Gaudete antiphon, in fact. Zephaniah exhorts Israel not to fear, Paul exhorts the Philippians not to worry. But *John's* exhortations, as Luke reports them in today's Gospel, are in large measure admonishments, denunciations and threats. For a bringer of Good News, we may feel John has a funny way of going about his cheerful business: **'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?' 'The axe is lying at the root of the trees. 'His winnowing fork is in his hand... the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire'.** Good News? Really? Are you joking? This is anxiety and fear.

You wouldn't have caught John the Baptist in a rose chasuble...

I wonder how much we want to offer John a hearing. Here we are, trying under the shadow of Covid to get ready for a cheery, comfortable, cosy Christmas, here we are looking forward to relaxation, warmth, family, fun, mistletoe and wine; getting ready, too – let's be fair to ourselves - to contemplate, religiously, piously enough, innocence and purity, the baby and his mother, and to savour God's graciousness, to rejoice in it. And now out of the wilderness stomps John, this graceless, uncivil figure with his disturbing 'Repent', his uncompromising challenge and menacing demand, his insistence on judgement and division (the wheat and the chaff), his mocking of our soothing Christmas candlelight with that threat of angry, consuming and unquenchable fire. We are already anxious enough with Covid and its disruptions; perhaps we would rather like John's rude and discomfiting presence to push off and not come back at least until this year is over, so that we can enjoy a short while in the cocoon of conventional Christmas contentment that we are trying, rather against the odds, perhaps, to spin for ourselves.

But this impulse to banish disquieting, uncomfortable John from the feast is an impulse to banish the true spirit of Christmas itself. We may like, at Christmas, to look back in a cosy nostalgia, to immerse ourselves in the traditions that have come to us from the past, to hold on to what has been; we may like to look back to ourselves as children, to our childhood's family traditions of celebration, and attempt through this backward gaze to recapture something of the unjaded anticipation and innocent delight of our own first Christmases – not an attempt to be entirely gainsaid. But at the very first Christmas, God was *not* looking back and reaffirming old traditions; God was doing something astonishingly and unsettlingly new, something unlike anything he had done before. God was entering our world as one of us, to change radically the way that world is. For all our nostalgia, Christmas isn't about things carrying on reassuringly the way they used to be; it's about change, necessary and benign change – and that carries with it challenge and therefore anxiety and fear, as change is wont to do. In fact, comfort lies in embracing God's change, but, at first, the embrace may be anything but comfortable.

John the Baptist with his menacing good news. catches the authentic spirit of Christmas absolutely. Why does God come incarnate into the world? – to put it to rights; why does God take our nature and become human? – to redeem that nature from its sinfulness. And putting the world and our nature to rights requires change; the thumping of the axe into the unfruitful tree, the sorting out and burning of rubbish. If we are to co-operate with God's new initiative in Jesus Christ, we have to be prepared to change – that's what repentance means. We have to allow Christ to clear out our deadwood and burn up our rubbish. Painful change, effortful change. For us and, actually, for God in Christ. If we don't co-

operate with God, if we disrespect the agony, endeavour and expense of God's love as that love seeks to change us, it isn't clear that salvation will happen for us. This is in the end why John's speaking of the good news is done in so threatening a way. In Christ's costly incarnation God opens rich, new possibilities for us, but it also always open to us to ignore them. John's forcefulness is an attempt to cajole us into taking up the possibilities offered, thus making the Good News Good News for *us*.

We can refuse to listen to John the Baptist, we can refuse to do anything about the challenge of Advent, which is also the challenge of Christmas, the challenge articulated so urgently and aggressively by John – the challenge to change in co-operation with God's initiative for change. Is our Christmas nostalgia a symptom of a disinclination to change, to move into God's future?

Before the carols and Christmas cake, the mistletoe and mulled wine close in completely and seduce us, maybe, into spiritual stupor we should at least give John the Baptist's message a hearing. He invites his contemporaries to repent, to change their minds, that is, about the way they have been behaving and to do something different. He asks it of us too – he reminds us of the judgment that is to come at the second coming of Christ. And, actually, this year perhaps we may be more prepared than usual as Christmas approaches to entertain the spiritual anxiety that is a concomitant of John's proclamation of the good news because of the pandemic and the anxiousness and worry it has dumped on our Christmas celebrations and because of the anxiety and worry generated by Covid in its exposure of society's failings. Perhaps the Christmas cocoon is now more difficult to spin; perhaps we are more prepared in our state of anxiety, to give John the Baptist's disturbing, anxiety-provoking message some serious attention.

What are we going to do in response to John's worrying exhortations? Well, in our Gospel today John offers some specific suggestions which have to do with the need to change dubious behaviours arising out of the temptation to acquire and hoard wealth and to exercise power at the expense of others. Those temptations are always to be resisted as strenuously as we are able. Maybe the coming together of John's strictures, our anxious state of mind and what Covid has exposed in our manner of living will help us to a possibly difficult and painful honesty as to where we stand on wealth, power and our obligations to others - and help us to change, to repent.

God will not *compel* us to respond positively to his Christmas project, to the coming of Christ as God Incarnate and what that sets in train. We are at liberty to ignore Christ's coming and what it asks of us, at liberty too to ignore the ongoing efforts of divine love for our sake. We are not under compulsion precisely because God loves us too much to *make* us do for him what he wants us to do for him freely out of love. But then, because we are not under compulsion, there is all the more reason to attend to John the Baptist's cajoling, hectoring voice – to the Good News couched as challenge. If we can freely respond to John and to God seeking through him the mending of our ways, then the Good News of the coming of Christ will indeed be Good News for us. If we can repent, then we will be able to rejoice deeply in Christ's coming because our own turning way from our misdirected thinking and doing and being will bring us nearer to him. But be under no illusion. There can be no valid, no real rejoicing without repentance, without turning, without change. We might rather not hear this. We might rather go unchastened and cosy into the traditional delights of turkey and trimmings on Christmas Day. But if repentance does not ratify our rejoicing, that rejoicing risks being simply superficial sentimental bonhomie, merely reckless expense and triviality, a parodic simulacrum of the deep, authentic joy of God's Kingdom.

Sorry if this seems harsh but that is surely the lesson John gives – and in fact the lesson that Advent as a whole with its theme of the second coming of Christ in judgement overlaying the theme of Christ's first coming gives us. But the lesson is given in the end only so that we should rejoice: Repent – and then the kingdom of heaven is indeed at hand for us. John makes the Good News sound so menacing only because he wants us to be able *truly* to rejoice in *truly* welcoming Christ.