



Sunday Reflection

Ordinary Time

in the Charges of St Margarets, Renfrew
& St Johns, Johnstone



For Sunday 12 December 2021

Advent 3

At Advent we look forward to the coming of the king. So let us worship him in active anticipation, that our hearts may be ready to receive him.

Reflection for this week's Gospel teaching

"John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptise you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.'" Luke 3:16

An Illustration to set the scene

The wounded on the First World War battlefields were not transported directly for hospital treatment.

A wounded soldier's first port of call was the Regimental Aid Post for immediate attention.

Further back from the line, his wounds were treated again at the Advanced Dressing Station. This prepared him for the CCS or Casualty Clearing Station, where surgeons worked long hours under difficult conditions.

Only after that might the soldier be sent for hospital care.

An immediate and effective response to a wounded soldier's injuries was vital in keeping him alive for deeper surgery and longer-term care.

There was no time to spare for the niceties of complex consultations and meticulously devised treatment plans.

Urgent action was needed if lives were to be saved.

Looking at the teaching of the Gospel

In our passage, the River Jordan has become something of a spiritual Casualty Clearing Station, with John the Baptist overseeing the operation of baptism for the arriving crowds.

God's people at this time did not live in peaceful contentment: Judea was under the sway of Roman rule.

The local puppet "King" Herod lorded it over a populace who longed to be delivered from oppression and restored to favour as God's nation.

Hope for the arrival of the long-prophesied, liberating messiah was wearing thin when John's unconventional ministry sprang up from nowhere.

No wonder so many sought him out in the desert.

Perhaps this was the moment of a divine breakthrough; perhaps, at last, the breath of God's renewing presence was near.

So the people flocked to hear John.

But rather than comforting the crowd, John challenged them. If they wanted the messiah to change their situation they would need to change their own ways.

Lives needed to be aligned with longings.

The Jews could not rest on spiritual credentials inherited from Abraham; they needed to make their own authentic response of faith and obedience to the living God.

John's call was urgent.

As the forerunner he proclaimed the imminent coming of Christ. But he did not leave God's people in a state of vague alarm – they could prepare by repenting and submitting to baptism.

But, John warned, this was not to be simply a ritual gesture.

A cleansing plunge into water brings no more healing to the spirit than a surgical dressing to a physical wound.

No, the fruits of this repentant turn were to become obvious in action.

John did not debate the theological niceties with the crowd about what constituted virtuous behaviour.

Time was too short.

Instead, he gave them practical examples of renewed living: the tax collector was not to extort money beyond his due; the soldier was not to make false accusations for personal gain.

Honesty and generosity rather than exploitation and greed were to characterise behaviour.

These actions did not constitute the grand overthrowing of a system, nor even great acts of heroism. They were simply the putting right of what theologian Tom Wright has called "*the small-scale injustices which turn a society sour*".

By willingly setting their lives in holier order, God's people were preparing themselves for a deeper spiritual surgery.

Christ's baptism of the Holy Spirit and refining fire were just around the corner.

How can we reflect on the application to our lives?

John the Baptist's message can be uplifting and unsettling in equal measure.

We may long for Christ to come close, enfold us in his love and put the world to rights, but how do we respond when it is we who are being challenged to change?

God does not ask the impossible of us, and it may even seem that what is required are very ordinary acts: to gossip less and encourage more; to share more and hoard less; to keep a promise; to listen to someone in need; or simply to offer a lift.

These are not vague, good intentions – they are specific, practical and immediate.

In doing the ordinary things we begin to develop holier habits that start to mould our character into a more Christlike shape.

This makes us more open and able to receive his Holy Spirit.

John's message carries an urgency.

We do not know when we will meet Christ, but we do know that the day is coming, and that he calls us to be ready.

“John answered all of them by saying, ‘I baptise you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.’”

Luke 3:16

Please share your response to this reflection to Rector@SECStJohnStMargaret.org.uk – did anything speak to you? Did you feel challenged, angered, consoled by something in the words? How did God' spirit move you as you read it? Have you shared the words with someone else? Is this a worthwhile thing to make available to folk whilst we cannot meet for corporate worship to share in word and sacrament? What are your thoughts?

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