

Philippians 4.4-7

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Luke 3.7-18

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize 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 baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

I wonder if you could guess what Wonder Woman, Prince Charles, and astronaut Tim Peake have in common? I'll give you a clue - it's something we think about a lot during Advent.

It's to do with waiting. All of them have had to spend a long time waiting, preparing for a time when they will have to give their all, try their hardest, be put to the test. Wonder Woman has to train to be a warrior, Prince Charles has spent his life learning how to be King, and Tim Peake spent years preparing to go into space. I'm sure you can think of other examples - it's a really common theme in films, that the main character has an important role to play, but they can't do it properly until they have invested a great deal of time preparing for it. We can probably all think of films with a 'training montage' where the expert teaches the beginner until they, too, are an expert.

But it always takes time. And it isn't always easy to wait. It isn't always easy to prepare, to train, to put in the effort so that when the time comes, we will be ready. And sometimes, we try to rely on someone else doing the hard bits for us.

In our Gospel reading from Luke this morning, this is what John the Baptist is talking about. Now he himself is a waiting person - he is looking ahead to the coming of Jesus. And not only is John looking ahead, but he is urging everyone else to look ahead too. And he's not exactly polite about it...

You see, the Jewish people were already waiting, for the Messiah they knew would come, but what they were missing was the preparation bit. They weren't training, they weren't getting ready. They were just living their lives looking out for themselves. And John is saying, that's not good enough!

You see, up until this point, they thought that simply being a descendent of Abraham was enough to put you in God's good books (as long as you followed the law). But it would be a bit like someone today saying, 'I don't need to be kind to people, because my grandparents were nice. They ticked that box for me'.

So John is pretty blunt with them. You can almost imagine him shouting in frustration - 'You're thinking about it all wrong!' - because you can't claim God's relationship with Abraham for yourself, unless you also have the faith of Abraham, shaping how you live.

Waiting for the Messiah is not something boring or passive, it's not about just sitting around. It requires action of faith. It requires a spiritual training montage.

In our reading, the people who have come to listen to John are quite taken aback with his message. And they ask him, again and again, 'What should we do? What should we do?'. And John replies, simply, 'Repent. (which means, turn - turn to God). Change your life. Be content with what you have. Share what you have.' And while we are surrounded by all the faff and stuff of Christmas, festive and enjoyable it may be, I think if we were to ask the same question, we would get the same answer.

'What should we do? How should we respond as we wait for the Advent of Jesus?'

John tells us - Repent. Be content with what you have. Share what you have.

I think our reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians also gives some important hints of how to prepare, how to train ourselves spiritually, while we wait for the coming of Jesus.

For such a short reading, there is a lot in it! First, we are to rejoice - be thankful for what we have. It's all too

easy to overlook our blessings, or to not even notice what our blessings are. But Paul tells us to rejoice always!

Then - be gentle. There will always be people who we find difficult, or situations where we are tempted to respond in anger, but Paul says 'Let your gentleness be known to everyone'. If we can offer a gracious response, or keep calm even in the midst of anger, people will notice a difference in us, and we will be known as people of gentleness.

And then, Paul says perhaps the hardest thing of all - do not worry about anything. Wow. Well I know I could work on that one a bit more! But Paul isn't saying that there is nothing to worry about, or that the things we worry about are unimportant. Instead, he is putting all our worries in the context of our relationship with God - the God who loves each of us as a beloved child, the God we are urged to pray to about everything. And if we can remember that we are held by this God who so loved us that he sent us his son, our worries can also be held by God, and we won't need to cling on to them ourselves.

You might like to know that Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians while he was in prison. So even in awful circumstances, Paul was following in the footsteps of

John the baptist, telling people to prepare - to train themselves spiritually, to be active in their waiting...

So the question for ourselves this morning is, are we just happily plodding along, or are we turning, repenting, preparing for the coming of Jesus by truly living our faith? Are we taking John's message to heart?

We may not be training to be a superhero, or a king, or an astronaut, but we are training for something even better - for God's kingdom, first brought to earth by a baby.

Preparation, and waiting, takes a bit of effort, a bit of self-control, and a bit of patience. Right now, we are in the middle of our spiritual training montage. We are waiting for the coming of a baby who will change the world, and John asks us to prepare in earnest.

To close, I want to leave you with an image of Mary, because I think you can see all these spiritual gifts that John the baptist and Paul speak of, shining in her. At this point, on the third Sunday in Advent, in the background of our waiting, we can imagine Mary - quite pregnant by now, tired, excited, probably nervous. Wondering about this baby she is about to have, who

was given to her by God, and announced to her by an angel. She is full of gentleness, thanksgiving, willingness to share in and be content with what God has given her. Her faith radiates from her. She is waiting. And we, as Advent people, wait with her.

Amen.