

Third Sunday of Advent, year C

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Introduction

For the third week of Advent — traditionally known as *Gaudete* Sunday — we find our liturgical imaginations turned towards serious things: Money and the company you keep. These are the topics for this Sunday's drama. And the stage? The wilderness, the region around the Jordan.

The characters on this stage are John the Baptist surrounded by crowds, with two examples of the breadth of the curious population being identified: Tax Collectors and Soldiers.

Luke's gospel is known as a gospel of universal appeal. Working within the particularity of the revelation of God to the Jewish people, the message of Luke's Jesus builds in its appeal and relevance to populations beyond just Jesus' co-religionists. And here, early in the gospel's unfolding story, we already see seeds of this broad appeal.

This Sunday is known in liturgical terms as *Gaudete* Sunday. *Gaudete*, meaning 'rejoice' or 'joyful'. For those who fast through Advent, it's a break from the fast, a foretaste of what's to come. The texts point to the true centre of rejoicing: a community of diversity held together in integrity, and care for those at the margins.

Text

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.

Comment

The gospel tradition regularly practices what has come to be known as ‘defamiliarisation’.

Defamiliarization — from the Russian word *ostranenie* () — was popularised by the Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky in 1917. Commenting on how the gospels employ this concept, literary theologian James Resseguie writes: *“Words are deformed in poetry in the same way as commonplace points of view are deformed by the sayings of Jesus. Defamiliarization causes us to stumble, and as we stumble, we begin to take notice... defamiliarization suspends, twists, turns on its head the familiar or everyday way of looking at the world by substituting a new, unfamiliar frame of reference... in the new testament, the point of view of the dominant culture – the religious authorities, the powerful, the wealthy, among others – shapes the norms and values of the society, and it is their ideological perspectives that Jesus and the narrator make strange. The actions and sayings of outsiders – for example, widows, Gentiles, Samaritans, Sinners, tax collectors, and, in general, the marginalized of society – deform and make strange the commonplace point of view expressed by the religious leaders, wealthy landowners, and the powerful”.**

Here, in the wilderness, away from the city, we have a gathering of the unusual. We see John — a strange man — surrounded by ‘crowds’.** And Luke goes to pains to characterise the crowds in two ways: through tax collectors and soldiers. One category was considered to have recinded their rights of belonging, the other category belonged to an occupying foreign force. And this is the family of God that is being welcomed in. At this stage in Luke’s gospel there are no forbidden professions, all that’s asked is that the people are fair in their work. Luke is not keen to paint a perfect picture of the world. As was evidenced in the political landscape outlined in the readings of the Second Sunday of Advent, Luke understands the mess of political reality. He doesn’t envision utopia, but he does demand — through the voice of John the Baptist — serious relational reciprocity from the ragtag population gathered out in the edge of the city. If your heart’s as cold as a stone, that’s okay, in the economy of this gospel, because God can even make children out of stones, and give them living hearts.

For Luke, primary integrity is shown in your relationship with money. Note the financial focus in the instructions to both Tax Collectors and Soldiers: *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.”*

Luke's gospel is written forty years after the events it is describing. For the writer, the events being foretold in the mouth of John the Baptist have already occurred: Jerusalem is sacked. And what will be left in this? People who support people, people who are not rich, but who are good to each other while recovering from the ravages of war.

This is less about conflict resolution, and more about the kinds of behaviours that will keep people alive in the aftermath of conflict, or the kinds of practices to help us survive conflict. As a *Gaudete*, it is not cheery, but it is true and is the kind of civic reciprocity that will keep us alive long enough to form the joy of human community together.

Footnotes:

**James Resseguie, Narrative Criticism of the New Testament: An Introduction, (Grand Rapids, Mich. Baker Academic) 2005, 34ff*

***The four evangelists use the term 'Crowd' to different purposes; sometimes depicting the crowd as skeptical and threatening, other times using the same term to refer to curiosity, mildness and collective fear. Luke's references to "Crowd" are worthy of a study in itself: Luke 3:7, 10, 4:42, 5:1, 3, 15, 19, 29, 6:17, 19, 7:9, 11, 12, 24, 8:4, 19, 40, 42, 45, 9:11, 12, 16, 18, 37, 11:14, 27, 29, 12:1, 13, 54, 13:14, 17, 14:25, 18:36, 19:3, 39, 22:6, 22:47, 23:4, 48.*

Response

In the gathering of humanity sketched by Luke we hear that he highlights that "even" Tax Collectors and Sinners.

Many — if not most — of us have groupings of people we might consider to be separated from us: whether because of politics, or because of associations.

Who are the people you would go too pains to avoid?

What does this reveal about you?

What is the pilgrimage to the places of wilderness, survival, generosity and community that this gospel text might call you to?

Prayer

Jesus, cousin of John,
like your cousin, you envisioned communities
made up with all kinds of people.
And with that imagination, you gathered
all kinds of people around you...
even us.
Call us towards the kinds of communities
that will shape and change us
towards a greater diversity, a greater justice,

a wiser distribution of power.
Because this is the Jordan
where we'll find you
and people like you.
Amen.

Season: Advent

Themes: Justice