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Introduction

John the Baptist was a forager and believer in a natural lifestyle. The protest elements of his ministry were wearing clothes of leather and eating foraged food, locusts and wild honey. He might fit well today with those who practise 'die-ins' lying on the road to prevent fossil fuels being burned, or who inhabit trees to prevent road or runway construction. He was a protester, a voice shouting in the wilds. Jesus was the prophet, the son of God, the man with the radical message. The protester—John grabbed attention, Jesus followed and hammered home his gospel, good news for some, and the end of entitlement and entrenched power for others.

Text

Matt 3:1–12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume 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 axe 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. "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Comment

If we take the role of protester and prophet for our reflection this week then it might be illustrative to look at the impact of the Youth Climate Strikes and the work of Greta Thunberg who addressed the UN on 23rd September 2019. Just as with the Pharisees and Sadducees the protesters have roundly criticised the adult

leaders of their communities. Greta Thunberg said ‘How dare you!’ with her whole person filled with emotion as she described the leaders of the world as obsessed with money and careless of the future of the planet.

Those leaders, and many who subscribe to their values, have not been slow to excoriate Greta Thunberg. She has faced a barrage of insults on social media and in mainstream media. The powerful message she brings has the force of truth, the polar regions have a crisis we cannot control and the Amazon is burning. The Victoria falls are practically empty and the people who live by the Zambesi fear they will never see its annual floods again in their lifetime.

The radical protester who has a plant-based diet, or only eats foraged foods, or only eats sustainably raised meat, or whatever the protest is, is a necessary part of a society facing a crisis. We need to see extremes in order to get the main body of opinion to shift. In this current case, we have known the facts of climate change since I was Greta’s age, more than a quarter of a century ago. What we have been unable to do is to get the environmental science to influence the majority of ordinary citizens. In all those years, even knowing what I know, I have bought and sold cars, taken flying for granted, and only made those changes which it was easy to make.

John uses the analogy of a tree that needs to be cut down. The petrol-based economy is literally cutting down trees that bear good fruit. We want to be able to clear our own consciences, and so going on a litter pick might salve the soul but it doesn’t cancel the impact of commuting, using a petrol car for short urban journeys, or buying single use plastic, or flying for holidays or work.

We also like to point to the complexity of the problems in order to excuse ourselves from doing the little we can. Just because a vegan burger might contain imported soya from more than one country doesn’t excuse the purchasing of junk food with intensively farmed and processed beef (which is probably fed the same imported soya). Both the soya and the beef need to be more sustainably farmed and eaten more locally.

Equally the human justice required of our world leaders is for them to ensure that the world’s wealth, food, health resources, and even those few oil-based products we really do need and can afford to keep, are more fairly redistributed. A good example is the need for accessible and widely used public transport as a viable option for the majority of urban journeys. Many people cite the inadequacy of public transport as a reason for taking the car on an urban journey. These sort of ‘helpless cycles’ are really easy excuses for not mobilising a bigger social change. If we improve public transport we also need to incentivise the use of it in order to ensure cars are not being used in urban areas where the effects of the air pollution are greatest.

If we want to hear the voice of John the Baptist today, we need look no further than Greta Thunberg. The question for us, as it was in Jesus day, is: are we wheat to be gathered into the granary, caring about our world neighbours; or are we chaff to be thrown into the global winnowing fire?

Response

Consider any actions you can take to reduce your CO₂ emissions. These might be turning down your thermostat, car sharing, using public transport, taking a ‘no-fly’ holiday.

OR

Think about the similarities between Greta Thunberg and John the Baptist. What can you do to add your voice to the prophetic call to action to slow the climate crisis? Is speaking out enough? What other actions could you take?

Prayer

God of eternity we come before you today
sorry for all those children who could turn to us and say,
'you have stolen my dreams and my childhood.'
For children facing an uncertain world due to climate crisis,
and our part in burning the fossil fuels of our planet.
We are sorry for the wrong we have done to the children
whose future we have gobbled up in shopping,
and using the earth's resources.

We hear the children saying, '**How dare you!**'

And we are sorry
Sorry to the pit of our stomachs
Sorry to the bottom of our hearts.
Forgive us, gracious God,
and let that forgiveness be neither easy nor quickly forgotten.

[Silence]

We pray to you, our god who forgives before we ask,
however little we deserve it.
As we step towards you to receive that forgiveness
so may we be enabled to live more humbly,
consume less, and grow more like Jesus every day.

AMEN