



On Jordan's Bank the Baptist Cries...

Luke 3: 7 – 18

Philippians 4: 1 - 8

You brood of vipers, who told you to flee the wrath to come. Bear fruits of repentance or else – the ax and the bonfire!!

Oh dear. Clearly, John the Baptist skipped the preaching seminar about wooing his congregation with humour and an anecdote from a recent film. Or maybe he was having a bad day, fed up to the back-teeth with the national news.

But check out today's gospel passage. What begins with fierce confrontation, ends with this line: *So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.* So where's the good news? Where's the rejoicing on this Gaudete Sunday? And why, despite this man's ferocious manner and locust-eating tendencies, did people flock to the wilderness to be shouted at? Today, we would consider this sort of behaviour rather ill-mannered, at best, and somewhat unpleasant. Even in the nicest possible way, we don't like to be judged. It raises our hackles. We want to be cajoled, persuaded, invited. We want tolerance. We want to be told we're doing fine but we might just like to try... ...Or do we?

Dr Jordan Peterson is a controversial figure. A Canadian professor of psychology and social critic, Peterson has attracted a surprisingly large following. He's not popular with the liberals, but I think unfairly. His book *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, published earlier this year, has been on the best seller list for self-help books in America, Australia and the UK for most of this year. Not unlike John the Baptist, Peterson is fierce and strong in his views and isn't afraid to confront with some force, things that look wrong to him.

For instance, one thing that looks very wrong to him is the degree to which individual rights have all but usurped any emphasis on personal responsibility.

Another thing he challenges is social ideals becoming the sort of ideology that silences anyone who isn't on side. It would appear that these 'judgements' and many more are speaking deeply to young adults, men and women caught in the relentless glare of technology, consumerism, social media and political correctness.

Judgement is not fashionable in our post-modern world, unless towards those who *hold* judgements. But *right* judgement, when you encounter it, is deeply liberating. I'm convinced that if the people were filled with expectation as they listened to John the Baptist that day no matter how fierce his words, it was because at the heart of that challenge was not the desire to be right, win points or do violence to another, but a hope for better things, a love for a greater truth, the truth of a greater love. True judgement is never a glare but the steady gaze of truth in which we are seen and invited into greater freedom.

The truth is not always soft or comfortable but it always set us free. And it will make others free besides, which adds to the urgency to get it right. That's what motivates the prophets. The burden of truth. We prefer mercy. We need mercy, certainly - desperately, daily - but it is *truth* that sets us free. If mercy is like rain from heaven that the earth soaks in with gratitude, truth is like the banks of a river, collecting that mercy and deepening it and sending it across the landscape. It creates the river along which grows those trees with healing leaves and fruit for every season.

That river of God's truth flows from the wounds of Christ empowered by the Spirit, and out into a parched city. It is truth, judgement, discernment, the way we *actually live* that *locates* the mercy of God and allows it to flow into the world. Water, after all, as wonderfully refreshing as it can be, can also become a swamp - collapsed and stagnant inside itself. Of course, very interesting things live inside swamps, but no one would mistake it for the life-giving waters of the Spirit. With no origin and no destiny, no boundaries to carry it, the waters become stale.

Truth is not just in the head, it has feet and hands and movement and heart. This is the sort of truth that Jordan Peterson is delivering in his 12 Rules for Life. Rules like: Stand up straight with your shoulders back - instead of making yourself a victim. Make friends with people who want the best for you - instead of those who want you to think a certain way. Set your own house in order before you criticise the world. Pursue what is meaningful not what is expedient. Assume that the person you're listening to might know something you don't. This is

simple, practical wisdom which isn't new-fangled but draws deeply from the best of philosophy, religion and psychology.

I'm fascinated by Peterson's appeal. But my point is less about the actual rules he offers – though I think many of them are very sound – and more about the need for rules, despite our belief that we can somehow reach the greatest good by simply winging it. The problem with winging it is that we just get carried away by whatever the prevailing wind is – and, I'm afraid, it is going dangerously in the wrong direction. And I'm really NOT talking about politics here but something much much more elemental.

I think this is why the people listening to J the B that day were not shamed or defeated but filled with expectation. They were given very practical challenges; real ways to make a difference, to love both God and their neighbour. They were not given impossibly holy hurdles to jump over. In answer to their earnest question – *What, then, shall we do?*, he urged them to return to their everyday lives and live them more honestly, more humbly, more compassionately, more generously, more radically – *in specific ways*.

The reason many would advocate a rule of life and not just suggestions or good intentions is because we have so many many forces pulling us in other directions – powerfully pulling us! We need to shape and specify our intentions; be held by them if we are to live differently and bring another perspective to the world. We need to actively discern how it is we are being called to be and how we should live. If we don't have a rule of life based on God's values, we simply conform to the rules, often unspoken, around us. Inspired by monastic spirituality, rules of life typically encourage a balance between work and leisure, service and prayer, contemplation and action.

The Baptiser, somewhat rough and very straight talking, calls us to repentance: to change our minds and to change our lives. He calls us to make a way in the wilderness, to straighten our path. It was this man that was first to recognise Jesus for who he was – first when he leapt in his mother's womb. This is the figure that should adorn our advent calendars. If we simply open glittery doors behind which we find chocolate, in the end, we find only a sweet baby Jesus.

We don't just show up on Christmas morning and recognise Christ. We recognise Christ because we have made that journey through the night with all the commitment that required. Or because we've stood out in the cold being faithful to

our sheep and heard the singing. Or because we've labored to be part of his birth.. Or because we've born fruits of repentance.

But we can't do this on our own. We need the baptism of the Spirit that Christ brings if we are to be faithful to our calling.

The theologian, Walter Brueggemann, has written:

... being baptised with God's holy spirit does not mean goofy charismatic acting out. It means, I take it, we may be visited by a spirit of openness, generosity, energy, that 'the force' may come over us, carry us to do obedient things we have not yet done, kingdom things we did not think we had in us, neighbour things from which we cringe, because newness is on its way among us. From The Gospel of Hope

The means of this newness might feel like a warm and tender embrace. A whisper and a promise. A gentle anointing. But John the Baptist reminds us that sometimes we need a fiery word and a practical response. If we were to allow ourselves to be challenged this morning, what would we hear? If we were to write a rule of life, based on the values of Christ, what would they be? I'm not talking about another to-do list! I'm talking about the ways we might foster the life of God both inside and out, allowing the Spirit to baptize our best effort and infuse it with the miracle of new life. How might we become the banks inside which Living Waters flow. How, indeed, might we prepare the way of the Lord?

In one translation of the bible called The Message, it's put this way:

What counts is your life. Is it green and blossoming? Because if it's deadwood, it goes on the fire.

There are things that grow, giving life and beauty and there are things that are dead; there is gold, refined by fire and there are tinsel dreams. There is the life of the Spirit and there is empty striving. There is what matters and there is what doesn't. There is wheat and there is chaff.

So, with many other exhortations, may we proclaim the good news to the people.

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