

**Sermon: Ven Susanna Pain
Sunday 13 December 2009
Advent 3C**

**READING
Luke 3:7–18**

I began and ended my annual report at the beginning of this year with quotes from Henri Nouwen. I'd like to return to those quotes as the year nears its end. First:

'We serve the world by being spiritually well' and

'If you are living in communion with God and in community with people, you cannot do other than minister.

Ministry is the overflow of your love for God and for your fellow human beings.'

Henri Nouwen, *Jesus a Gospel*, p.36

I thought these words apposite and I leave them for you to ponder as a background to this sermon.

I wonder how many conversations have you heard recently that began, 'So what do you still have to do to get ready for Christmas?' 'Have you bought all your presents yet?' (*Seasons of the Spirit* p.45)

The 'to do' list comes out – baking Christmas cake, buying gifts, decorating, packing for holidays ...

In the middle of all this tinsel and busyness comes the strident voice of John the Baptist calling for repentance. He asks of us a turning from cliquey self-satisfied justice – freedom. He is not calling down the wrath of God but trying to shake them out of complacency. This is a bit jarring in the midst of our busy cheerful frazzled preparation but it reminds us once again that our preparation must be more than skin deep.

We are invited to stop and ask, 'What should we do?' as we get ready for Christmas.

John the Baptizer's audience was a motley crew – many outside of socially acceptable religion. 'What should we do?' they all ask. The answer is clear – it's not earth-shattering – share, don't extort, accept only your due, don't bully – sensible really.

Having too much, bulging wardrobes, overflowing cupboards, crowds out space for God. Too much means too many decisions, worry about security.

Physically, sharing, letting go, makes more space for God.

The same with extortion and bullying – they hurt us as much as others.

Bullying

Taking more than our fair share – harms us, clogs our clear conscience,
Gets in the way of our peace, or relationship with God.

Simple really,

Yet John is getting so frustrated with slowness in acting – slowness in putting things right,

Letting go the things that make for peace of mind.

It seems, 'sharing is good, but not always easy', writes Raymond Fung.

Sharing across economic, cultural and racial boundaries requires special sensitivity. Sharing is so much of a Christian calling in itself that we want to make sure our sharing empowers people and does not humiliate those who receive, builds trust and understanding and not resentment and hatred.

How then do we share? There are generally two ways.

One is that we share out of a sense of generosity. We have, while others have not. We are developed while others are underdeveloped. We are privileged while others are less privileged. We reach out to others because we are different from them.

This is a worthy motive. And many acts of philanthropy have been undertaken on this basis. On the other hand, the same generosity has often been turned into an excuse to perpetuate injustice, domination and paternalism. Sharing out of a sense of generosity, in any case, is sharing from a distance, because it is based on perceived difference.

The other way is the way poor people share among themselves – out of a sense of solidarity. We share because we understand and feel the pain of others. We reach out not because we are different but because we are no different. We see ourselves in the suffering of others. We drop our pretences and dare face our real selves. So we share. People know the difference between the two ways. And they respond accordingly.

Here we come to the theological heart of the matter. As we work to make real the vision of Gods realm, amidst the powerlessness of children and old people, and side by side with men and women struggling for their daily bread, their reality will, like a mirror, show us a s never before our own poverty and powerlessness.

Here is a story from one particular Church –

Christmas. It is the season of sharing gifts and toys with the children. But not for the children in the slum. Their parents have no money to buy them toys. So for this particular congregation it is time for their members to start collecting toys, toys from middle-class homes and from their sister congregations in the suburbs. This year, however, this congregation has done something different. They have seen that when they handed over the toys to the children the children were overjoyed, but the parents were embarrassed. The more the children boasted of their toys to each other, the more ashamed were their parents.

Sharing should not have the effect of taking dignity away from people. So the Christians in this church devise a plan. They collect many old toys. They invite the parents to clean and to mend these toys, and then to decide on the price. The church pays the parents in coupons, according to their work. With these coupons, the parents buy the toys of their choice for their children. The day of the toy sale comes. Some church folk and some from the slum stand side by side as salespersons. There is never such natural closeness and fun between church people and the slum community. So the children have their toys, and the parents the dignity of giving. And the church has a trusting and equal relationship with the people in the slum.

This has come about because the people in the congregation remember what it is like to parent and be poor. It is the methodology and the spirituality of solidarity.

With this attitude of shared woundedness, a parish stands a good chance of becoming a community and spiritual home. Christians need no longer put on masks. We can let brothers and sisters share our lives. We no longer feel ashamed of letting people know that we have needs, that we have wounds on our bodies and on our souls. And we need others to heal us and to walk with us as we lead the Christian life. If Christians can break out of this structure of alienation, the seed is sown for our encounters with the world to be deeply meaningful.

Seasons of the Spirit Congregational Life Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, 2009, p.50, *Excerpted from The Isaiah Agenda by Raymond Fung, World Council of Churches Publications.*

Look at some of the encounters in Copenhagen. The good news is God is not the God of the in-crowd but God of compassion and justice, the God of solidarity offering a peace, which passes all understanding. This is good news. How do we deepen this relationship, act justly, let go, trust, know we are loved?

What should we do?

John's words expand our understanding of 'repentance' from personal morality (*Seasons of the Spirit* p.45) to justice.

As we celebrate ways our community is already reaching out, we look for seeds of a new calling.

The beneficiaries (*Seasons of the Spirit* p.44) of repentance will be those provided with warm clothing or food, with friendship and respect. Those previously cheated or bullied.

God's spirit works through acts of justice and compassion as well as acts of refraining from injustice to prepare the way for Messiah and a greater intimacy with God.

The Philippians line in this intimacy with God and knew that peace which passes understanding.

If you asked John the Baptizer, 'What should I do?' What prophetic word would he have for you? for Holy Covenant?

This is the good news.

In Zephaniah we read,
'God will renew you in God's love.
God will exalt over you with loud singing.'

God says, 'I will save the lame and gather the outcast.'

Philippians:
'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.'

Henry Nouwen:
'We serve the world by being spiritually well.'

'If you are living in communion with God and in community with people, you cannot do other than minister.

Ministry is the overflow of your love for God and for your fellow human beings.'

Henri Nouwen, *Jesus a Gospel*, p.36