

Advent 2, December 7th, 2025

10.30 Holy Communion, All Saints Oakham

Isaiah 11.1-10, 15-18; Romans 15.4-13, Matthew 3.1-12

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

On Sunday 12th January 1868, a 29 year old clergyman called Charles Atherton, newly installed as the vicar of a small Black Country village, preached the annual new year sermon, that by tradition was a review of the previous year and a look forward to the next. In that sermon, amongst many other things, he addressed his congregation as follow.

".....It appears that those who have been loudest in the praise of the choir, and in their desire that a choir fund should be established, are those whose names are not found on the list of subscribers to the choir fund. I would venture to remind some of those who appropriate seats in the church that by not subscribing either to the schools or the choir they are absolutely doing nothing for the church, they are having their religion at a cheaper rate than they could have it anywhere else, and they are taking up room that might be better occupied by many families who are waiting for sittings...."

He was basically saying that some members of his congregation were a waste of space. How many clergy have longed to have the nerve to do that down the decades! This episode was an early incident in the much longer saga of Charles Atherton's ministry that I have related on a number of occasions, including to those here from Saxon Gardens, but I was reminded of this incident when reading today's gospel. John was baptising the crowds who came to him, and seeing the influential and, in their own eyes, the most important members of the community coming to see him, turned against them with the words

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.

Not exactly how to win friends and influence people. John is often said to be the last of the Old Testament prophets, and he certainly delivered a message of coming judgement that would not have been out of place in the mouths of the prophets foretelling the destruction of Jerusalem many centuries earlier. He went on to say

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.'

Words taken to a large extent from the last book of the Old Testament, the writings of the prophet Malachi. But despite this message of judgement, the crowds flocked to him for baptism. Why on earth was that – it hardly seems sensible? Because as Matthew says in the gospel, quoting the prophet Isaiah from 600 years before, John was

‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”’

These are the words that Isaiah uses to announce the return of the exiled Jews back to their country from Babylon, words of comfort and words of hope. And John was using them to announce the coming of the Messiah, who, indeed will come with judgement, but a judgement that would put things right, that would usher in the kingdom of God, where there would be fairness and justice. Yes, repentance was required, but John’s message overall was one of hope for a better future, for those who were downtrodden and oppressed by the powerful, and that is what attracted the crowds.

But let’s look at that ear bashing that John gave to the Pharisees and Sadducees. Firstly, it is worth noting that Jesus used almost identical words against the same audience. From Matthew 12

You brood of vipers! How can you speak good things, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.

Vipers, and snakes in general, don’t get a good press in the bible. From Psalm 58

The wicked go astray from the womb; they err from their birth, speaking lies. They have venom like the venom of a adder.

And from Psalm 140

They make their tongue sharp as a snake’s, and under their lips is the venom of vipers.

From Paul in his letter to the Romans

Their throats are opened graves; they use their tongues to deceive. ‘The venom of vipers is under their lips.

And underlying it all are the words of the serpent to Eve in Eden

But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not die if you eat of the fruit of the tree, for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.

And it seems to me that what John and Jesus were railing against was the poison that came from the hearts and mouths of the religious authorities, that turned the good into bad, made the gift of the law that God had given them to live by, and onerous and heavy thing, and had made his gracious choice of the nation of Israel a source of xenophobic pride. The poison of the viper was used as a metaphor of poisonous conversation and speech. And it was this poisoning of the good that was to face judgement.

But alongside this, and overwhelming it, in John’s message there was a cry of joy, that the Messiah was coming, that all would be restored, that justice and truth would reign. In our Old Testament reading, the prophet paints a picture of that Messianic kingdom. The Messiah will be

A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

From the destruction and chaos, a descendent of David, the son of Jesse will arise, and the Spirit of god will be upon him – words that Jesus took to himself at the start of his ministry in Capernaum. And he will come as judge, but that judgement will be perfectly just, laced with mercy for the poor and the meek.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

And then he gives us that wonderful picture of life in the kingdom, of nature at peace with itself, and the vipers put in a reappearance

The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

The viper's poison shall no longer have any power, and

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

When the apostle Paul was shipwrecked on the isle of Malta, we read of the following incident

Paul had gathered a bundle of brushwood and was putting it on the fire, when a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand. When the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, 'This man must be a murderer; though he has escaped from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live.' He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm.

Those who observed it took it to imply that Paul was a God, which Paul hotly denied, but for us this morning an indication again perhaps that the power of the poison has been broken through the one who Paul followed.

So what do these readings say to us. Firstly perhaps to pull us up short and make us consider our own behaviour. Does our life, and in particular our speech, have the tendency to poison relationships, stir up rumours, speak of the bad rather than the good. And here I am preaching to myself as much as to you. If so, that is where repentance and an active change is required of us. A Hindu holy man Sathya Sai Baba has coined the memorable phrase

Before you speak, ask yourself: Is it kind, is it necessary, is it true, does it improve the silence?

My wife has this written on one of her T shirts she sometimes wears, which can be more than a little intimidating in conversation! But beyond that need to look to ourselves, the promise of Isaiah's prophecy is as true today as it was for his hearers, that, because of what Jesus has done on the cross and resurrection, there is hope of restoration for this torn and battered world where to use Mother Julian's now rather hackneyed phrase, all will be well and all manner of things will be well. And the earth shall be filled with the

glory of God as the waters cover the sea. At the end of the epistle Paul quotes our passage from Isaiah and goes on to pray for his readers.

'The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope.' May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

That you may abound in the advent hope. Even so, come Lord Jesus.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen