

JESUS IS COMING, LOOK BUSY PART 2

The Rev. Mark D. Wilkinson, Rector
St. Aidan's Episcopal Church
Virginia Beach VA
www.aidanvbva.net
Advent 3 2009

So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. Wow, now how many of you are feeling the love from John the Baptist on this Gaudete (rejoice) Sunday with this gospel?

Last week I began to form my sermon when I saw a man wearing a t-shirt that said, Jesus is coming, Look Busy. The question that came to mind is what did that looking busy, involve. What type of activity should we be doing?

John the Baptist spoke of preparing the way, making the way straight, the mountains low and filling in the valleys. All of a sudden this week in the second half of the story he turns on the people who have come to be baptized and calls them a brood of vipers. Now in Matthew, he is talking specifically to the Pharisees, but in Luke he turns to the crowds. Now what is that all about?

A viper is a deadly venomous snake. This is an interesting choice of animal to label those whom John is angry with. Remember it is a snake (serpent) in the Garden of Eden who leads Adam and Eve astray so I do not think his choice was accidental.

John is angry at the hypocrisy that he sees among those who claim to be faithful Jews. This brings me to the t-shirt of this week. I was on line at Cafepress.com which is the best place to find T-shirts, mugs, bumper stickers, whatever with interesting slogans. I found the Jesus is coming, look busy, T-shirt from last week, but then came upon one that resonated with me. This one said, **"I love Jesus, it's his fan club I can't stand."**

John is in effect saying the same thing about those who have come to be baptized because as Peterson says in his Message translation, it is the thing to do. They profess their faith with the mouths, but they do not act in a way consistent with the words of the prophets. They have come to be baptized for their sins, but John does not see any sign of repentance.

The Rev. Stephen McWhorter was the rector of St. David's in Ashburn Virginia. I remember watching him sit down with the parents of children who were about to be baptized. He would start off the baptism preparation class with the following words. "If you are coming here to have your child baptized as some sort of holy fire insurance, forget it. That is not how baptism works. If you are coming here to have your child baptized so that you can bring them up to be Christians and you too will

promise to be faithful members of this parish, then we can proceed.” John is saying much the same thing.

It is not enough just to show up and say, we believe. The series of questions from the various groups and the answers begin to unpack what this repentance meant to the people of that day. John gives some specifics to groups who were definitely not high on the social roster, tax or toll collectors and soldiers. As long as they paid the Roman authorities what they were due, the toll and tax collectors were free to charge any amount. Roman soldiers, in this case probably mercenaries, were not paid that well and often extorted money from the local population in what in effect would be a protection scheme. Now we can distance ourselves from these two groups by saying, well we are not like them.

However, John addresses the general population as well with a message not to be greedy, to share, in other words to act as the prophets of old taught. Take care of the poor, the widow the orphan. This past week the readings for the daily offices have all been from Amos including the place where he calls for justice to roll down like streams from the mountains. This is the message John is proclaiming and he is proclaiming it to us. Even more important he is saying that is not just doing these actions because they are the righteous thing to do, but to become righteous we must be transformed. Our hearts, must be changed.

Peterson translates what will happen when Jesus comes this way, “ (He) will ignite the kingdom life, a fire, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out.” This type of transformation is not just about changing your mind, but about being transformed by the Holy Spirit. This is the change that Jesus brings to the baptism of John. The Spirit is what makes this all different.

The question that the people ask and that we should ask is, “What should we do?” Take a moment this week and re-read this gospel. Imagine that you are there at the Jordan River among the many people. You walk up to John and ask him, “What should I do?” Take some time this week to sit with that question and see what the Spirit lights inside of you.

In testing the answer look to the measuring rod that John gives us. The NRSV passage is not as helpful as Peterson’s translation. “What counts is your life. Is it green and blossoming? Because if it’s deadwood, it goes on the fire.” In other words, what are the fruits of your actions, your thoughts, your heart. Do they provide fruit that you are proud to show to Jesus? What is the chaff, the useless husk that is not needed, that does not bring the kingdom closer. In fact the chaff is what gets in the way of the kingdom.

I want to come back to that T-shirt, I love Jesus, it’s his fan club I can’t stand. The fan club is a symbol for all those who pay lip service to being Christian and then act in other ways. The members of the fan club are those who proclaim a loving Christ and then act in ways that are anything but loving. In working with the 20 somethings of

this world, this hypocrisy is so obvious to the millennial generation that many want nothing to do with the church. Among his friends, James is one of the few that darken the door of a church. Wendy was giving out snacks that had been donated by St. Andrews's and St. Stephens' at Christopher Newport during exams. The students were very reluctant to take the free food. Why, because it was a church group handing it out. They wanted to know what the catch was. They simply did not trust this group of Christians who were being nice for the sake of doing something nice. Think about this, college students reluctant to take free food because it was given out by church members. In effect these students are standing there pointing at the Christian church in general and calling us a brood of vipers, deadly dangerous people. This should be cause for great concern. We can and must change that perception.

So John, "What should we do?" Once again, what is the busy that Jesus wants us to be about this Advent as well as in the seasons after?