

Online sermon on Sunday 12 December 2021 by Melanie Seward, Lay Reader

Readings: Zephaniah 3:14-end and Luke 3:7-18

Turn around



Neil Postman, Head of New York University's Department of Communications, predicts that technology will chain us not liberate us. It undermines certain mental processes and social relations that make human life worth living. We need to reassess our relationship with technology and make better decisions.

Hear Greta Thunberg speaking to World leaders at the United Nations: "You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words, and yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering, people are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you?"

I wonder, do we see either of these voices as being prophetic - as giving us an insight into how are society needs to change? Of course, the problem is that there are always other

voices. It wasn't any different in biblical times. Prophets shocked people and the challenges they issued often made for uncomfortable listening. John the Baptist belonged to this long tradition of biblical prophets.

He didn't kowtow to social expectations, political favour, or religious status; instead he called a spade a spade and said it like it was: 'You brood of vipers! Vipers, poisonous and devious, hide themselves amongst the firewood. When the stubble is burned after the harvest, many snakes burn too.' John says to the crowd, Don't think that God will treat you differently just because you see yourselves as being in a special position because you are God's people! 'Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down.' Everyone is feeling uncomfortable - Am I a fruitless tree? Have I wandered from the life God would want to me lead? Will God's judgement fall on me? The clamour goes up: "What then should we do?"

Now in verse 3, Luke's Gospel records that John was proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, but how he does this is of great significance. He doesn't just say make your sacrifice at the temple or even tell people to pray and turn back to God. He doesn't say be kind or even, treat everyone equally. He answers the crowd giving them concrete and practical ways of turning from evil and self-centredness to goodness and God-centredness. Those that have two coats - in other words, those that are wealthy - must give to those who have little or nothing; give clothing and food. We might add today, school uniform, washing machines and educational support, regularly support local charities to make a difference, give things to those who need them instead of selling stuff on e-bay, and don't keep everything for ourselves.

John tackles another group. The tax collectors are told only to collect the amount set. Interpret that as: Make sure people pay a fair rate, don't charge for hidden extras when people have to pay a bill or buy a service. John is asking: How can God want us to feather our own pockets by cheating people or taking advantage of others? This matters to God.

Soldiers also ask John, 'And we, what should we do?' He says to them, 'Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation and be satisfied with your wages.' In our society, we might say don't take bribes or 'backhanders' or 'gifts', don't be swayed by money, and don't bully or threaten others to make your way in life.

John's examples of changing behaviour carry a cost to the individuals in goods and cash but also there are ramifications to bear. And the same is true for us today. Sharing clothes and giving them away for free undermines the principles of the constantly changing fashion industry which exploits resources and encourages a throw-away society to make money creating jobs. If you don't take bribes, don't overcharge or you explain the catches in the contract in a job where it is common practice, you stand to do what is just and fair; this makes life difficult for others and may make it jolly uncomfortable for you to continue in that employment. The interconnectedness of sin means that our failings as individuals do not just affect us, or even the people we interact with, but also support the values and systems in our society that inflict widespread poverty and disadvantage.

Repentance can be seen as an embarrassing confession and accepting your punishment as having to live with less ease and therefore pleasure. I don't think that this is what John the Baptist or God is about. With the message of repentance

comes baptism, with the message of judgement comes the means of our salvation, with repentance comes a new way of living.

In this he echoes the message of many of the OT prophets. Our Old Testament reading was from the book of Zephaniah. Jerusalem had become unfaithful in its worship of other gods alongside Yahweh and had become corrupt – the wealthy and the powerful took advantage of the weak and poor of society. Yet, if they repented, they could avoid the same fate. Zephaniah envisages salvation for all nations and his vision is of Yahweh's universal reign in Jerusalem.

And so, with John the Baptist-

He says repent, or turn around, from a life based on self and walk with God. Live and act differently.

Get ready for the One who will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Prepare and make room for Jesus who comes into the heart, welcome the One who brings salvation to all.

Information on Neil Postman and Greta Thunberg from article below.

PROPHETS OF THE 21ST CENTURY; [Matthew Sweet](#)

Sunday 22 December 1996

<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/prophets-of-the-21st-century-1315626.html>