

Today we have such a gospel message, such good news, it is really quite extraordinary.

And no, I am not being a politician attempting to persuade you that 5 more years of austerity of good news.

We don't always associate John the Baptist with good news. We think of him as a wild charismatic figure who preached hellfire and damnation. Well he did that too. But that was really only the introduction, as he attempted to persuade people that they needed to change.

The crowds that flocked to hear John the Baptist found it hard to believe what he was saying.

To begin with they thought it was terrible news. Who wants to be labeled a brood of vipers? 'Repent' he said, and he warned of the dire consequences for those that were found wanting. Images of branches savagely hewn with an axe being thrown onto the fire - terrifying, brutal, final!

Those that listened and believed were desperate to avoid this end. They cried out: 'what can we do.' 'How do we escape this terrible punishment.'

I wonder what they expected in answer.

Perhaps they thought that they could become part of an elite sect, holders of the truth, of knowledge known only to a few. Perhaps they thought they would have to go through tests, trials, that would demonstrate to those around them how committed and special they were.

Those that secretly wanted to be held in awe by their contemporaries for their zeal would have been disappointed by John's reply.

For his reply was straightforward, amazingly simple, and easy.

Be generous. If you have two coats, share with someone who has none.

Be honest. Take no more than is due to you.

Be content. Be satisfied with your wages.

These are achievable goals for everyone. That is the extraordinary good news.

However, because it is so simple, it is easy to overlook. That is why as a church, as well as individuals, we need to adhere to these simple tenets.

Be generous. At a time when we as a church are being asked to pay more and more to the Diocese, and we are finding it harder and harder to pay for all the work that needs doing, there is inevitably the question – should we as a church be giving money to charity. Our committee has unanimously decided that yes, we should. So as always, our Christmas collections will be given to charity – this year to the Children’s Society, the Alzheimer’s Society and Crisis. We will continue to support charities in our annual giving, for 2013 our charities will be USPG, Church Urban Fund and Christian Aid, Wimbledon Guild, The Children’s Trust Tadworth and Kids for Kids. We will do this because we are a wealthy parish and it is the right thing to do. However much or little we have, we can always give a percentage away to others who are less fortunate. This church gives 5% of our income to charity. That will continue while we have income. It does mean that sometimes we cannot do all the things we would like to do, but so be it.

Be honest, that was the second instruction. The papers are full of condemnation for Starbucks and Amazon who have devised such devious means of avoiding paying tax. We are very quick to point out those who are not honest. The church as a charity is exempt from many taxes, but it is still required to be honest in all its dealings. That means that we cannot, for example, photocopy music without permission. It is in the little things as well as in the large things that honesty matters. It is very easy to think that because we are a good cause, such rules need not apply to us. They do. The church needs to be more not less honest than the society around it.

And finally, be content. To be content with what we have and who we are – that is the secret of happiness. A church can be described in many ways, by its worship, by its building, by its music, by its doctrine. Within any congregation you will find people who would quite like to change their church a little, alter the worship or the doctrine. But the heart of a church is its people. That is what gives it life. To be content with our church is to love the people, and accept the tensions that inevitably follow. Contentment means becoming more aware of the good things around you – or, to use the old fashioned phrase, ‘count your blessings’.

So, the question we need to ask ourselves, is, if it is as simple as this, why don’t we take it seriously? I think the answer is that we take two thirds of it seriously. We try to be generous, even though we know that we are not as generous as we could be. We try to be honest, even if sometimes we adhere more to the letter of the law than its spirit. But it is in the remaining third that we so often fail. Lack of contentment is our driving force, making us work harder, striving for more and better possessions, education, holidays and so on. We have made a virtue of discontent. In fact, this is the first thing we need to work upon. For when we are content with what we have, we will find it easy to be generous. When we are content with who we are, it is easy to be honest.

This is where we need to begin. With joy that we are so diverse. With thanks that we all have different gifts and abilities. With delight in meals, friends, family.

For as St Paul wrote to the Philippians:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. <sup>5</sup>Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup>Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup>And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.