



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Third Sunday of Advent

Readings: [Zephaniah 3:14-20](#); [Philippians 4:4-7](#); [Luke 3:7-18](#).

15 December 2024

Benjamin Franklin, in 1789, stated that “in this world, nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes”. To which, this year, I want to add a third certainty: that Christmas seems to start earlier and earlier every year. This phenomenon is apparently now known as “Christmas Creep”. This year, it has seen mince pies for sale in supermarkets in September, Christmas trees being for sale before Remembrance Day, and the Flintham family receiving our first Christmas card (not from abroad but just from a friend in London) on November 14th.

Recognising that “if you can’t beat them, join them”, and also being inspired by the presence of our own Cathedral Christmas tree beautifully decorated by the Office Staff, I intend on this 3rd Sunday of Advent to indulge in my own version of Christmas Creep. So I am *not* going to try to emulate the powerful sermon last week from my colleague the Acting Precentor on John the Baptist’s call to repent and the meaning of such repentance in our modern context. But I *am* going to preach about Christmas trees and their decoration! Yet I *will* try to relate all this to John the Baptist and the substance of our gospel reading.

For this somewhat unconventional approach, I still need a text. And what could be better than Luke 3 v 8: “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”. This not only predicts the fate of Christmas trees in a few weeks’ time, but also the inevitable future of a world that will not hear the true message of Christmas.

Developing an idea from Lucy Mangan in The Guardian newspaper some years ago that it is possible to identify four quite different styles of Christmas tree decorators, I propose to call these: the Perfectionists, the Loyalists, the Expansionists and the Minimalists. And that gives me 4 points on which to hang this sermon on John the Baptist.

1 The Perfectionists: these are folk who approach the task of Christmas tree decoration with teutonic thoroughness and precise attention to detail. Their trees are beautifully colour-coordinated and symmetrically adorned. They can often spend several hours moving a single bauble between 2 branches less than an inch apart, before asking you “what do you think?” and promptly doing the opposite.

They are the equivalent of the Pharisees in our gospel reading: concerned only with the fine detail, obsessed with getting it to look right, rather than doing the right thing. Traditionalists: ‘we have always done it this way’; full of pride ‘we have Abraham as our ancestor’ so *we* know how to do it right. But it is John the Baptist who seeks to bring them down to earth: telling them God is able even from these stones to raise up children to Abraham, so don’t get too cocky about *your* status. ‘Bear fruits worthy of repentance, for even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire’.

So back to Christmas trees and my 2nd style of decoration:

2 The Loyalists: these are the folk who will not throw anything away, who will make do and mend, putting up with the things they’ve got. Their trees are a patchwork of collected treasures from over the years,

carefully stored in a box in the loft and lovingly brought out each year. Their trees obey two simple rules: decorations must be as old and mismatched as possible, and they must be so numerous that the branches point vertically downwards under their weight, for all must be used, or what's the point of keeping them? They won't stop until every single decoration is in place, and the result looks like a giant green squid which has made off with the entire contents of a jumble sale.

This approach can be linked to the tax collectors and soldiers addressed by John in our gospel reading, those who had co-operated with the Roman occupiers in a philosophy of putting up with what we've got, of managing with what we have, of not worrying too much about the consequences. John exhorts them to focus on the essentials: do not take more than you need, do not abuse your power, be satisfied with what you've got. But *do* worry about the consequences of your actions, for there will be consequences. You are called to repentance, to renewal, and to restraint.

3 The Expansionists: no restraint here. These comprise the 'over-the-top' brigade. Not content with decorating a single indoor tree when there are trees in the front garden, roofs and gutters also calling out for flashing lights, or chimneys crying out for blow-up Santas and reindeers. And why stop there: why just have 10 lights on a tree when you can expand to have 10 thousand on a whole house? In fact several houses in Mackworth now carry light displays which would make Blackpool envious, the most long-standing of which involves over 11,000 lights and incurs an electricity bill of £1000 a month to run, but to be fair, does raise much more than this for charity. An expansionist philosophy clearly based on 'More is better'.

This 'more is better' approach is seen in the crowd in our gospel reading, for it is seen in the self-aggrandisement and one-upmanship that is a perpetual component of the human condition. Why just make do with one coat when you can afford two or more? And so when the crowds ask John: "what should we do" to repent, he tells them simply "whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise", a particularly relevant admonition at this time of year when all the supermarket Christmas adverts (which also start earlier and earlier) encourage us to indulge in gluttonous excess.

4. The Minimalists: Not 'more is better', but 'less is best'. A bare tree, adorned with nothing more than a single string of white lights, which may be allowed to twinkle but certainly never to flash, carefully positioned, artfully understated, reduced to what they see as the minimalist essence of Christmas.

John however boils it all down into one simple minimalist call: 'Repent and Believe': believe in the Good News that is coming into your world, believe in the Messiah who will come as your Saviour...but also as your Judge.

And what will we be judged against: that the light of Christ has come into a darkened world and we have not received it; that we have preferred darkness to light, misogyny to equality, greed to need. Christ is the light by which we can see to pass judgement on ourselves.

And it is Christ who offers us the minimalist yardstick against which to do it; Christ who offers us the minimalist condensation of the commandments we are called upon to obey: "*Love God...and love your neighbour as yourself*".

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