Sermon

Advent II Yr A

8/12/19

Eltham

**Readings**

**Isaiah 11.1-10**

**Psalm 72.1-7, 18-21**

**Romans 15.4-13**

Matthew 3.1-12

+FSHS

Prepare.

How many of us have watched those reality TV shows? This year I watched most of House Rules – mostly because 7Two was running catchups on Sunday afternoons, and after getting home from church at around 2:30/3pm most Sundays in a mindless daze I hooked in and so got hooked. But reality shows are all the same: they work on a competition of sorts, where the contestants give it their all – whether building and furnishing a room, or cooking or baking some confection, or trying to charm the Bachelor/ette. Through the course of a week the contestants do their best, and the producers carefully sculpt the story so that we hear of all the highs and lows, watch at the contestants drop their prize piece of whatever and it shatters and oh nos! they have to rethink what they’re going to do and how they’re going to meet the challenge. And at the end of the week the contestants have to face the judges – usually two strangely dressed blokes and a woman – and hear feedback and a score. Every other week is an elimination round, and we all know what that means. The contestants who know they’ve not done so well are on edge, anxiety is high, tactics get dirty, tensions erupt on set – all great elements of drama. And then they walk into the judging space and the music playing over the scene heightens tension. And what gets me (as it’s designed to do), is that the judges hand down their feedback: “… and so I’ve given you a score of…” and right at that moment they cut to a flipping ad break!!! Oh my goodness. Put the poor people (and the audience) out of their misery and just tell them the score already! The way judgments are handled are one of the many reasons I usually choose not to watch reality shows. Nevertheless, there’s something that hooks us in about the way it’s done which has us sweating (and perhaps tearing up) almost as much as the contestants.

We all fear being judged. That’s a human thing, and it’s a human concern because humans operate by making judgments. Is this food safe to eat? Does that noise represent a TRex that’s going to eat me, or a creature I can kill for food? Is that facial expression on the face of a stranger “I’m angry with you and am going to thump you” or is it “I’m embarrassed about the fact that my cows got into your corn”? Is that person a friend or kin, or are they an enemy? All of those judgments are basic to survival (which is largely about fear). We know this, and yet we still tend to operate out of a model of fear and its resulting judgment. Because it’s not just what I fear which causes me to make a judgment about something or someone. It’s also my fear of being judged by them – and found wanting. Nobody wants to be that person who’s excluded by a “them” they desperately want to be part of (fear of being on the outside, of being exiled from the clan, loss of identity). Nobody wants to be that person whose work or identity itself is found lacking, not good enough, doesn’t measure up.

That’s why models of the Last Judgment and the idea that at the end of life we face God’s judgment have worked in the past, and also why the idea that God might find my life wanting and so chuck me into the lake of burning fire is both terrifying and repulsive. To hold to a view that the Creator God disposes of beloved creatures by throwing them into a cosmic fire is abominable; and to then use that picture to coerce people through fear to some kind of abject faith is abhorrent. Because while God is the Judge, and Jesus the divinely appointed arbiter (and mediator), I cannot believe that God’s justice and some concept of God’s “wrath” overrules God’s mercy and love so completely that God would destroy God’s beloved children and beloved creation.

That’s going to put me at odds with some of my colleagues, and with a great deal of historical theology. It also means that we have to wrestle doubly with the words in the gospel reading today, where John referring to Jesus talks about the one who is coming after him whose winnowing fork is in his hand to thresh the wheat, to judge and to separate the grain from the chaff, and to baptize in the Holy Spirit and with fire. Essentially, John’s suggesting that to encounter Jesus is to face judgment.

It’s clear that Matthew intends John to be seen as the return of Elijah, the prophet who called down fire from heaven and which consumed the sacrifices on Mount Carmel, the offering, the wood, the stones, and the earth itself. He is the forerunner who cries, “Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight his paths.” A picture of a massive works programme to make highways that run levelly and are clear of debris and overgrowth. What kind of preparations does John have in mind? The ordinary people came out to be baptized, confessing their sins. So preparation is about acknowledging where we’ve gone wrong and turning to God for forgiveness and help to live restored lives. The scribes and Pharisees came out (you brood of vipers!), the fine upstanding citizens, the “good people”, the comfortable middle class including religious professionals. John castigates them for their duplicity (why are they really there?) and then nevertheless gives them a clue about how they can make straight paths: bear fruit worthy of repentance, that is, that they too need to repent of their pride and arrogance, and to recognize that they are not the judge. And so their lives will show the fruit of that repentance. There’s a chilling undertone in all of this, because we know that most often when the Pharisees encountered Jesus they faced judgment, and didn’t like the result. If the people were to engage in the kind of preparation John encourages means that when Jesus comes on the scene, when they encounter Jesus, the fire doesn’t burn, the winnowing fork doesn’t hurt, and the baptism of the Spirit has already happened: and instead they will welcome one who brings close the realm of God.

How does this work? What kind of judgment did Jesus engage in? Healing, preaching, living the realm of God which is not of this world, and which stands power on its head. Jesus’ judgment is to tell the woman caught in adultery that he doesn’t condemn her, and to go and sin no more. His judgment is to eat in the houses of tax collectors, to accept the touch of prostitutes, and himself to touch the lepers. All of those whom others judge – Jesus’ judgment is to get alongside them, to bring wholeness and healing, light and life, hope and unity instead of division and “othering”.

So how might encounter with Jesus judge people? In Jesus we meet the invisible God made flesh. We see what God is really like in him. And when we encounter that Presence, and the eyes that see and know all with infinite justice and compassion, we find ourselves looking in a mirror, and judge ourselves to be lacking – because that’s the model we operate out of and expect from those around us. It leads to two reactions: repentance or resistance. In repentance we accept God’s judgment – which is forgiveness and strength to live God’s way, for God sees the big picture of our lives and is more qualified than we to judge us. And God’s judgment is mercy and compassion for all who turn to God. Resistance leads us, with the religious professionals of Jesus’ day, to do violence to ourselves and to others. That’s the death-dealing choice. If we repent, the mirror dissolves, and we realize that in our union with Jesus we have his Spirit living in us to lead and guide us into all truth, and away from judgment.

Three levels at which this call to prepare/repent works: For each of us as individuals this Advent we hear again the call to repent. To name the ways our lives and living fail to manifest the realm of God in love for ourselves, our neighbours, and been less than wholehearted in our love for God. We prepare for God’s coming among us (first and second comings) by turning again and seeking forgiveness and strength to live renewed lives, and grace to be transformed ever more and more into the likeness of Christ.

For the church: we must be willing to name honestly that we religious folks may be the ones most challenged by Jesus’ coming. We have domesticated the gospel into polite news for the middle class instead of being saved in encounter with our judge. At this time in particular where there is such temptation to judge and “other” people who we deem to be lacking, encounter with Jesus calls the church to repent of fear, anxiety, institutional stuck-ness, and systemic injustice, and to be set on fire with love for God in the renewal of the Spirit. To be in unity and to proclaim hope.

For all of us: that the call to prepare and repent (and so find salvation) takes us beyond ourselves. If we are baptized with the Holy Spirit and in fire in our encounter with Jesus – in word and sacrament – then we are also commissioned to go and carry that good news into the world, to hold up the mirror to injustice and oppression, to set the prisoners free, to resist powers that dominate, exclude, and do violence to others. To touch the earth lightly, to be agents of healing and reconciliation. To prepare in the world for the one who is to come, so that God’s justice and judgment may be announced, and God’s mercy and truth flow down, and fall like dew on new-mown fields. If we live this prophetic call of repentance and salvation, we will be part of seeing the vision Isaiah spoke of made real:

The wolf shall live with the lamb,  
     the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
     and a little child shall lead them.   
**7** The cow and the bear shall graze,  
     their young shall lie down together;  
     and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.   
**8** The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,  
     and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den.   
**9** 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.

Let us repent and prepare this Advent.

The Lord be with you.

**And also with you.**