

# Third Sunday of Advent – 15 December 2024

## Message – How is loving kindness seen in your life?

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Creator, Redeemer, and Giver of Life, help us to bear fruit, good fruit that will last, now and always. **Amen.**

John the Baptist called people to repent, that is to turn around from a focus on themselves to a focus on God and others. As a pleasant account of past events, it is easy to leave it there. Yet, John's message is as relevant to us as it was to the people of his day. His message is not the whole gospel but it is an essential part of the Good News.

As I said last week, it is remarkable that so many people were going out to hear him and to be baptised. John's view of their sincerity is not altogether charitable though he does not stop anyone from being baptised.

The religious leaders and elite in particular felt they were exempt, though they had at least turned up. 'We are descendants of Abraham', they said, with the implication that this is all that is required in order to be righteous before God.

Luke takes the opportunity, again, to point to the inclusive nature of the Good News. It is not exclusive to Abraham's descendants, being a descendant is no guarantee at all, God can include anyone and even anything in the Kingdom.

Of course, nothing like this happens today! No one would ever think that just being baptised or just attending church is enough to show that we have repented and turned to God with all our heart. That baptism and attending church

is all there is to being a Christian is probably a common perception among non-Christians, which, if we are to successfully proclaim the Good News, is a challenge.

Many Christians do good deeds and bear much good fruit. We are not called to proclaim this: Let your good deed be done in secret (*Matt 6.1*). However, some changes of the attitude of the heart will inevitably be visible to others.

One area of life particularly challenging to any community is gossip. We too easily move from genuine concern to fascination in another's struggles, to fill in the gaps in what we know and pass on news that is less than accurate, to move from compassion to judgement. We need to think carefully about what we pass on to other people.

One thing I personally would like to return to is the first thing I say about someone always being positive. For those thinking '*that's impossible*', it was a challenge I set myself at theological college recognising that the sarcastic comments that I more readily make do not show loving kindness to others. Why this has been so much harder now I am in ministry is probably something I should explore with both my spiritual director and supervisor.

So, I have admitted to you all one of my challenges for the coming year from which you will guess this week's question to ask yourself. In week one, we had how can I deepen my prayer life? In week two, we had how can I use my gifts and talents to serve God and others? And now, in week three, we have how can my life bear more good fruit, both visible and invisible? Repentance is always evidenced by good fruit.

John the Baptist gives practical examples to three different

groups of people. To the ordinary people he says, *'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.'*

There is a very long tradition in the church of supporting those who do not have enough food, clothes or shelter. Today this could be reflected in our support the combined Christian foodbank, to which many of you are giving through the food bags. It might be reflecting in support of the combined Christian hostels or support the work of Anglican Action or perhaps the Salvation Army.

Giving to the poor can today be complicated. Not everyone who appears poor is as they seem. Working through agencies ensures that our good intentions are well focused and that, as best we can, our resources are meeting real needs. Sometimes, we will know someone well enough to recognise a need. Yet, even then things can be complicated. What we see as a need may not be another's need because they value other things. So no, I don't need any socks!

The next practical example John the Baptist gives is the tax-collectors who are to collect no more than they need to. Turned on ourselves, it is about how we use our money. Do we ensure that the ways in which we make money and the things we purchase have not involved the exploitation of others or harm to the earth.

Ethical use of our money and other resources is a huge issue with many dimensions to it and often we will have to make some kind of compromise along the way because there isn't what we would consider a perfect product, whether financial or physical.

We all also have differing priorities. So will have different starting points but an obvious start is buying fairtrade products when we can. For a wider perspective the good shopping guide is a UK organisation that assesses companies and products on the ethics of their production and delivery.

It started out with regularly produced books but now has a website [Thegoodshoppingguide.com](http://Thegoodshoppingguide.com). Many of the companies are not present in Aotearoa New Zealand but many of the brands are. And there are some surprises in there both good and bad.

We may feel that as Christians we are a small group so what can we do. Yet, as most people just go with the flow a small group can have a significant effect on the world and, often, there others who will support an ethical stance because it is in our human nature to care for one another.

Finally, John the Baptist addresses soldiers. These are likely the recruits from local the local population working locally, the civil police of the day. They have been given power over others and they can use that for good or for ill.

Few of us are powerful, that is the way of Christ (*1 Cor 1:26-31*). Christ came as the servant King. If we do have power, we are to exercise it in the service of others.

If we do not have power, well, just remember the story of the persistent widow and the unjust judge (*Luke 18.1-8*). We still have a role to play in standing up for the powerless and those least able to help themselves. In part this comes back to where we started, with practical social support but sometimes we can also advocate for others.

If our repentance is genuine then our hearts will be

changed; we will put God and others at the centre of our lives not ourselves; our lives will be transformed.

We need to remember that this is Good News. John the Baptist exhorted people to change in the context of bringing them Good News. Christ continues that proclamation and lives out the Good News for us all.

So I invite you to consider over the coming week, how can my life bear more good fruit, both visible and invisible? What two things would you like to change in the coming year, one visible and one invisible.

As we reflect on John the Baptist's words, we may wonder whether the church is one of the trees that in many places is not bearing good fruit. We are certainly being pruned heavily. But, in the midst of such pruning there are also signs of new growth.

We are called as a church and as individuals to bare good fruit, to be a force for good in the world around us to bring to others fullness of life.

We have also received the baptism that John could not give. Each of us has God's spirit dwelling within us and is held by God's grace. God's purifying of us is not always comfortable nor appreciated at the time but looking back we see our slow growth into the heart of God.

We will never get everything right but if we as a community try to show love and are always ready to forgive, God will be found in us, we will be found in God, and others may find God through us.