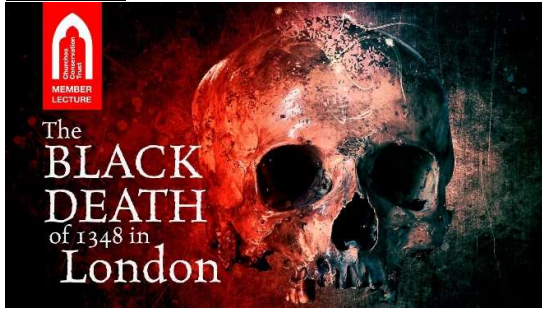


SERMON – 12 DECEMBER 2021 - ADVENT 3 – ZEPHANIAH 3, PHIL 4,  
LUKE 3



In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I am a member of the Churches Conservation Trust – it’s what we used to call the Redundant Churches Fund, an organisation set up to protect and maintain churches no longer required for public worship. During the pandemic they have produced a lot of very high quality lectures, you can find them on youtube – lectures on all sorts of fascinating churches from Edmund King and Martyr to one entitled “The parish churches naughty bits”. I’ll leave you to search for that. This weekend’s email has invited me to an exclusive lecture tomorrow evening entitled “The Black Death of 1348”. You know what, I don’t want to spend a Monday evening, especially this week, learning about “The Black Death of 1348”. It may well be absolutely fascinating, but I think I’d prefer an evening of steam train videos. There is a limit to the amount of plagues one can cope with at once.



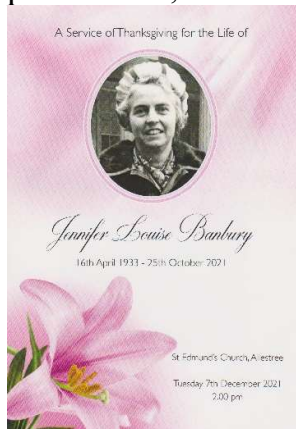
So let’s have a nice cheerful Gospel reading a couple of Sundays before Christmas. ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?’ And our response, yeah OK.

With my Diocesan Ecumenical Officer hat on, I got an email this week from a gentleman who lives in the north of the County telling me how the Lord has given him a message for the churches. About our need for repentance, and a wholesale change in our attitude. He had a go at our silence at couples who cohabit – his language was rather more colourful – and told me what God will do to those who are gay (“gay” wasn’t the word he used). I did what I always

do, press delete – but as I wrote this sermon, I did find myself wondering whether I would have pressed “delete” on John the Baptist.



The Jews used phrases like “Abraham was our ancestor”, the Church of England knows itself to be part of the bedrock of the country – God is on our side, we represent that good folk, the stability. Recently Facebook decided that, as a Church of England priest, part of the fabric of this country, I was a fair target for a post from a group promoting “traditional British values.” Basically, right wing propaganda from a group whose latest wheeze is to load all the migrants onto a hovercraft and dump them back on the French beaches – the benefit of a hovercraft apparently being that it doesn’t have to go into a harbour, so the French can’t stop it. What happened to the traditional British values that have welcome the refugees for centuries, helped people fleeing war and persecution, and worked so hard to build community.



We did the funeral here last Tuesday of a lady called Jennifer Banbury. Until about ten years ago, her and sister Janet were part of the life of this church – then they went into sheltered accommodation. Jennifer spent many years as head of a primary school in inner city Coventry. Her family told us that this single lady embraced the diversity of that multi-cultural community, learning, among other things, how to tie and wear a sari. I never met her, but we can imagine a dedicated teacher, embracing difference, bringing people together, building community – keeping her Christian faith, and using that faith to go the extra mile, to love and care, proclaiming that we are all made in the image of God. I can imagine her too, standing up for what is right, challenging parents, challenging society – most teachers I know have incredible backbone. And I thank God for them.



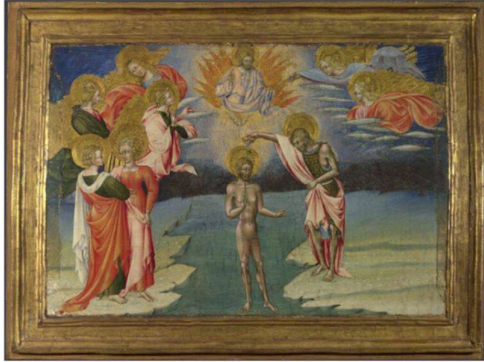
John the Baptist's teaching is perfectly straightforward – God is calling us to bear good fruit. We wouldn't argue with that. That's what most people want to do. My social media is full of smashing stories of lovely people bearing good fruit. Volunteers giving up their weekends to bring joy to hundreds of children as Santa Claus rides a steam railway, volunteers preparing for Crisis at Christmas, out there night after night, loving and caring (and not just doing it at Christmas), folk who are protecting the environment, caring for one another – the list goes on, and on, and on. It is, and has always been, the case that millions get on quietly doing their best to bear good fruit – and their good fruit, good actions, are drowned out by the evil actions of a few.

But we are also reminded that none of us are perfect. “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” We wouldn't argue with that, and we are generous – but as a man who lives in a four bedroomed house, with more coats than I could possible need. One day back in the depths of the pandemic, I ended up doing the Food Bank Run, taking the stuff from Primrose's Shed to the Hope Centre. And as I had the car out, I came back via Croots Farm Shop. That still makes me feel uncomfortable – there you are, here's your selection of tinned food given by the nice people of Allestree and Darley Abbey, I'm off to Croots to get farmhouse quality. I can come up with all sorts of economic arguments as to why that's OK, I can quote Scripture about “the poor you'll always have with you” – but I still feel uncomfortable, and it's right that we should.

To the tax collector, be honest, collect what is prescribed, do not cream off a bit more to make yourself a profit. Soldiers, don't use your power to extort money, be careful with the power you've got. How much better 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain would be if tax collectors, soldiers, politicians, etc etc, followed those instructions. We should expect it, we should demand it – evil should not just be laughed at, it should be rooted out. Too often laughing is easier.

The people in the desert are wanting something – something new, something different, something just, right. But even there, motives would be mixed. Some would be following John in the hope that he would lead a rebellion against the Romans, some probably wanted a fight. Some wanted to get back to Jewish

values, probably as unpleasant at the British values I was presented with. We want the Messiah, whatever that is.



And John welcomes them, and John baptises them, and John challenges them, and John proclaims the good news to the people. Some of those people would have changed their lives, followed John, followed Jesus – probably been the disciples and the believers we read about in the book of Acts. Others would have continued living their normal lives, but trying to live them a bit better than they were. Some, no doubt, would have had an amazing day or two in the desert – spiritual experience, or just something so different to normal – and perhaps it wouldn't have made a huge difference in the long run. But something, the fire of God's love, touched them all.



The other two readings set for this morning tell us to rejoice. You know that I struggle with that at Christmas because the memories are very painful, but together we do give thanks, we do rejoice, we do proclaim Good News. And when, in less than a fortnight, we light the middle candle of the Advent Ring, we know “Emmanuel, God with us.” May we share our faith and our rejoicing with others – help them to find a deeper, to rejoice, to be God's people, to work for his Kingdom to transform this world. Amen.