

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 12 December 2021

God of the universe, revealed to us in Holy Scripture through the writings of the prophets and the preaching of John the Baptist, you have called us to prepare our hearts for your visitation. Ready us now to hear your Word and to respond as faithful servants to the glory of Christ. Amen.

Isaiah 12:2-6; Luke 3:7-18

The chaff, winnowing, and the fire

We continue to think about John's proclamation of a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Today the focus is *winnowing the chaff to yield the grain*. In the past, winnowing the chaff had been done by hands or primitive tools. Nowadays, people use a thresher, but the principle is the same. Although chaff seems useless, the chaff is important to protect the seed inside from the weather, insects and keep the seed safe until it ripens. But when the time comes, the chaff has to go as it finishes its role. In spiritual terms, winnowing the chaff involves reflections, repentance, and being anew. We'll think about the chaff, winnowing and the fire through Luke 3:7-18.

The chaff

John's baptism of repentance revealed the chaff in those who come out to be baptized by him. He says to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come."¹ By calling the whole crowds "you brood of vipers," he makes it clear that a religious heritage doesn't make them God's people, for God can create a new people from stone. We notice that John addresses this threat, not to individuals, such as religious leaders, but to the group as a whole. He continues that the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.²

The axe imagery appears again in Luke 13:6-9 in the parable of the barren fig tree. In the parable, the fig tree hasn't produced fruits after three years of care. The gardener asks the tree owner to give him one more year till he digs around it and put manure on it. If it doesn't bear fruit after one more year, then what? The axe. Jesus uses the axe imagery to warn those who are with him to examine their faith seriously. Faith without actions will be ready for the axe. Both John and Jesus warn God's people against self-

¹ Luke 3:7

² Luke 3:9

approval. If the community identifies itself as God's own people but doesn't bear the fruit that God desires, God is always capable of beginning again with people who are willing to listen and obey. Indeed, the target audience of the warning is not the Jewish crowds only. It applies to us - the baptized Christians. John's warnings correspond to a modern-day theological term, namely 'cheap grace.' The word - 'cheap grace' is coined by a German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer who describes 'cheap grace' versus 'costly grace' in detail. For him, the two concepts are against each other. In his book, *'The cost of discipleship,'* he writes,

"Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate...Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble; it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him..... Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock."³

At this stage, we who seem to be the subjects to the warnings from John and Bonhoeffer can't help but think about what fruits God might want us to produce and if we have produced such fruits after all. Indeed, having more baptisms, more people in church on Sundays, investing more time and work in church or charity, and reading the bible and praying to God diligently may be part of the fruits of discipleship. But there are many more invisible actions that are not easily observed or counted. How are we accountable to it, then?

Winnowing

John's warnings let people repent as they see that they are insulated by the chaff. The crowds ask him, "What then should we do? John replies to the whole crowd - Do you own two shirts? You have more than you need. Do you have food? Give some away. The command is absolute: if you have people in your community who don't have

³ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

enough to survive, and if you have anything at all, share it. The next questions move beyond sharing to corrupt systems, in this case, soldiers and the tax collectors.

The problem then and now is that resources have been taken by only a few. John calls not only the wealthiest but also those who may feel comfortable with what they have accumulated. John continues that he is merely a messenger preparing the way for the stronger one. That one will baptize in the Holy Spirit and the fire. The fire imagery is not only the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost, but the refiner's fire prophesied in Malachi 3:1-5 in that the messenger whom the Lord is sending is like a refiner's fire and like fuller's soap. He will purify God's priests and refine them like gold and silver.⁴

The fire

The refining fire comes to the last stage of winnowing the chaff. Being winnowed may be like a life-or-death event from the wheat's side. The separation from the chaff by force may be a terrible experience. But it's not the end. The fire is waiting for the chaff. But what will the fire burn up? Is John saying that some people will be destroyed, and others will be saved? But no one could claim truthfully to be all wheat and no chaff. We have both in us. Once Jesus says to Peter, "Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."⁵ When the stronger one winnows the wheat and burns the chaff, he will sift out and destroy the impurities within every person. As the water of baptism, the promised fire is a gift that cleanses. God's love is a consuming fire that burns the chaff in us.

We are already living in a new normal as God's people. The new normal requires us to behave differently from the past. As if the chaff needs to be removed by winnowing, we can't cling to the past while remembering the glorious past. Instead, we look deep in ourselves and remove the chaff so that others can see the true grain in us as the living proof of Christ Jesus. The winnowing will continue until the grain is entirely revealed. Regardless of normal or new normal, we continue to ordain elders and ministers, send missionaries to an unknown land, preach scriptures, serve the weak and the needy, baptize children and adults, read scriptures and pray to God every day and serve one another daily. May God help us live like grains that have passed through the winnowing and the fire today and always. Amen.

⁴ Malachi 3:3; 1 Peter 2:9

⁵ Luke 22:31-32