

Advent 2 Dec 6th 2015 Luke 3:1-6

Warning! Lidl mince pies have been voted best mince pies after Fortnum and Mason, so hurry if you want a really tasty snack this Christmas. While stocks last, don't miss out.

I'm sat here writing in this in Sainsbury's café, how many warnings are there in this shop alone? 'Always read the label', 'Caution may contain hot liquid', 'May contain nuts'. There are calorie counts on the café menu. Gluten free, wheat free, always drink responsibly.

Mobile phones will fry your brain, hot showers will give you skin cancer, jogging will wreck your knees, it's a wonder anyone survives into next week let alone into old age! There are warnings of cyber attacks on our email, scam salesmen at the door, there's risk assessments and health and safety policies. Next to a stairwell in an American bank was the notice, 'Consult your doctor before attempting to alight these stairs', and a tiny toffee hammer which insisted on the wearing of safety goggles before approaching any salted caramel.

We live in a cossetted world yet become more fearful. Yet the bible tells us that Perfect love drives out fear.

We are surrounded by warnings and signs: men working overhead, don't walk under ladders, go nowhere on Friday 13th, green cars are bad luck, avoid shellfish in months without an 'r' – how about this one: don't pick blackberries after September as the devil spits on them.

The message and the messenger are two separate things but the credibility of the messenger is all important. People won't care what you know until they know you care. X2

When it comes to warnings about threats to our lifestyle, our traditions, which do we laugh off and which do we take seriously? Well what's the source of the information? When we were told that Saddam Hussein had Weapons of Mass Destruction and the capability of launching a nuclear strike against the West within 45 minutes, how could we argue?

Our politicians have a very difficult task weighing up evidence and discerning truth and we should

pray for them. Jean Uren of St Adlhelm's was asked by the local MP what was the church's view on the debate whether or not to bomb Syria.

We needn't feel the pressure to have an opinion on everything and bombing Syria is a good example. We are not experts in foreign policy we can't test every claim about the impact of doing nothing or doing something. The underlying problem is that trust is in short supply. Integrity seems to be unfashionable and with a lack of integrity comes disintegrity, or disintegration. Our own integrity and holiness will affect our credibility as messengers of the gospel.

What do you share with family friends and neighbours – a joke, gossip, special promotions on Lobster Thermidore in Aldi. What if there was a forecast of torrential rain, raging winds, deep snow drifts. Predictions of the parking scheme have been dire – North Street traders will go out of business.

I wonder what you talk to others about? Would it matter if I told you the Lidl mince pies have been found to contain traces of antifreeze? Would you

believe me, would you tell others? What if a stranger told you the same information? The message and the messenger matters.

‘Malachi’, or ‘malarky’ as it was once pronounced, means messenger as was John the Baptist. We say don’t shoot the messenger don’t we but around the river Jordan where JTB was preaching a baptism of repentance, crowds flocked to hear the message from John. Why, because he had an authority that was compelling and a message which they knew they need to hear. He had integrity and a live relationship with God. That’s why what he said was persuasive, it was convincing, it wasn’t a cheerful popular message, but it conveyed truth of a different order. God had given words for JTB to speak and when that happens, those who have ears to hear and eyes to see will respond.

John didn’t say things that made people laugh or cheered them up. JTB wasn’t a circus act entertaining the crowds, he wasn’t competing with pleasure or leisure, but he was reclaiming hearts and minds for God. Precious few are doing

God on North Street, but that's our core business, transforming self and society into the likeness of Christ. This is rather like parenting – children don't want their parents as friends, they need boundaries, guidance, to feel safe and protected – that they can trust and rely on Mum Dad or guardian to look out for them.

We have lost confidence as Christians in two ways. Confidence in our ability to explain our faith, to even say what it is and confidence that God has given us a mandate, that He might have called each of us to share the good news. Are you confident that Jesus is good news for people or have the noisy chattering classes persuaded you that to hold a belief to be true makes you dogmatic, intolerant, belligerent, even abusive! Jesus claimed to be truth. Interesting, the idea that some things aren't a matter of opinion – for example, whatever anyone's view, this is undoubtedly the church of St Francis in Bedminster. Equally, a medical man and hence a scientist, wrote the gospel of St Luke

Most people find sharing their faith difficult embarrassing even impossible – so here's the dilemma, the unspoken truth. All of us realise that without the people telling others about the hope that we have, the church in the West will shrivel and die. Yet most Christians I've known just live with guilt not knowing what to do about it and hoping that someone else will do it for them. It's as if God has set us up to fail, isn't it? You're asked to do something you can't do!

God doesn't work like that though. He equips those he calls, not the other way around.

Remember there were plenty of important people – an emperor, a king, a high priest who had plenty of resources at their disposal yet God chose a weirdo from the wilderness to call people to repentance and gave him the only resource necessary – word from God.

In the quote from Isaiah it is we the messengers who need to get right with God. Not just regret past misdemeanours and feel sorry for the consequences of sin but to actually acknowledge

and turn away from the habit of sin itself. The bible says against God only do we sin!

When we sin, or abuse one another and God, the consequence is that our relationship with God is damaged and in turn we have little to tell others. How can we tell people of the love we experience, of the security and warmth and affirmation we receive from our heavenly Father if in fact we don't! We cannot give what we don't have – how will you be excited about telling others like you would the birth of a grandchild, of the flowers from a loved one, or passing a driving test or that a nephew has got a place a university or that your neighbour's got the dream job they always hoped for – what news do you have to share of Jesus? If we only feel guilty and ashamed, if God is to be avoided, if all we offer is working harder doing good things in the hope of pleasing God we become ineffective as messengers. Yet we can't manufacture or fake relationship, people smell insincerity and God sees right through falsehood. So here's the good news - the promise from Isaiah is not simply that a messenger will come crying in

the wilderness pointing people to the true messiah, but that salvation is available to all mankind. If you and I put our trust in his unfailing love, if we turn back to God, if we repent, turning around, changing direction, then valleys and mountain and hills, all the confusing blind allies and crooked mixed messages that obscure our sight of God, will become clear and we will see God.

We are warned to prepare the way but it is God who shines the light, brings the clarity, helps people see clearly and directly and the straight road ahead which leads to salvation and freedom from the slavery of guilt, and to the hope of everlasting life and fulfilment in this life as well as in the next.

We live in a time where the tsunami of secularism, the wave of the 'because you're worth it' me-first culture seems irresistible – and I was intrigued by the suggestion that a new emerging religion is 'victimhood' – that is, my world is made too stressful by other people and they must be prevented from saying or doing anything that

makes my world uncomfortable. So we heard recently in universities they want to create safe spaces in which people are essentially gagged, where freedom of speech is stopped.

These are dangerous and uncertain times and our liberty is being threatened by a security state and a society that is becoming increasingly intolerant of Christianity. The colour supplement of the Sunday paper reported two articles that reminded me just how our society is imploding morally and it was moral collapse that ended the Roman empire and ends all empires.

One article described a growing body of men of all age groups and circumstances calling themselves Men Going Their Own Way. They have given up any hope that relationships can work and that they are simply too costly – they refuse to enter into the very fabric of society – that is family and relationship. They conclude that divorce maintenance payments or accusations of rape are the inevitable consequence of rampant and aggressive feminism that has left many men wondering what their role in life should really be?

The last institution to be abandoned is relationship itself – how tragic. This might be extreme but I believe this perspective has to be listened to carefully as we discover that teenagers are more likely to have a smart phone than a father at home.

The next feature described in a very matter of fact way professional women openly attending women-only orgies. Our society has thrown away morality as a concept. Conventional relationship with one another and with God is breaking down altogether.

What then can we do? We are not JTB – he had a particular role for a particular people in a particular place in history. But then so do we.

If Luke's gospel had been written last year in Ashton Gate, today's passage would read something like this, 'In the sixtieth year of the reign of Elizabeth The Second, in the second term of the prime minister David Cameron, during the Archbishopric of Justin Welby, the word of the Lord came to St Francis Church, Ashton Gate.'

All of us here have the word of God that we are to speak into people's lives. God chooses whom he chooses and He plants each of you among people in all kinds of settings to be a signpost, to be a messenger of hope to the lost, those in a wilderness.

How though do we share our faith if we have no confidence in our ability and no confidence that it will be heard anyway? Were you ever persuaded by someone shouting at you? Bishop Mike said he admired the courage of the sandwich boards and those shouting the gospel at you in Broadmead but doubted the effectiveness – I share his conviction.

Equally, bashing people with the bible, being known as the God squad where everything gets spiritualised and you quote scripture at people will simply alienate you from the people you hope to reach you hope would come to know the love of Jesus. What then can we do? We are to respond in gentleness and respect and be ready to give an answer for the hope that we have, but I believe we should also pay attention to the life

events where people become spiritually aware – an anniversary, health issues, worries about redundancy and fear about the future. How does your faith help you at times like this?

We must resist the idea that as a church we are somehow in competition with retail, sport, eating out... we are not a leisure activity, our calling is to make truth known about who God is and what we learn about him in the person and life of Jesus. We need to separate the message from the messenger.

What excites you about your faith? What is it you want people to know? How does Jesus help you through the valley of the shadow of death? How does the presence of the Holy Spirit strengthen you in your inner being and make you gasp sometimes when you catch a glimpse of the kingdom of God, when you touch the hem of the rabbi as he passes by moments in your life? When did you last meet with him I mean really meet with him in a way that fires your hope, lifts your spirits?

If that's you today and you have never or haven't for a long time asked Jesus to come once more into your life and reassure you that you are forgiven and loved, now is a chance to repent to turn away and invite Him once more to be Lord of your life, be the straight path to salvation, that is available to all flesh, to everyone and that we need not live lives of fear and loneliness and guilt and worry, but free and confident and hopeful.

You might want to share in a simple prayer of confession and rededication...

Dear heavenly Father, I am sorry for going my own way, living as though you weren't there or that you didn't matter. Forgive me, I turn away from sin and repent, asking your forgiveness and preparing my heart to be ready to receive you afresh. May the flames of faith be so fanned within me that that rest of my life signposts people to your kingdom. I want to be a messenger of hope to this generation. Amen.

What will you share with others after this talk and over this Christmas period? That Lidl Mince pies are second only to Fortnum and Mason or that

salvation has come to everyone in the form of
Jesus