

I wonder if you can manage to picture in your minds the scene in today's Gospel. John the Baptist, dressed in a garment made of camel hair, a leather belt round his waist, bare-footed, a wild-looking beard, and fierce eyes glowing from under his strong eyebrows.

The place is somewhere along the banks of the Jordan, where a bend in the river has created a strip of sand, not far from a spot where the river can be forded easily, to make it accessible to a good many people. There hadn't been a prophet in living memory, so people flocked to this place to hear what words of challenge, of warning, or of encouragement this somewhat strange creature had to say.

And they weren't disappointed. Matthew, in his Gospel, tells us in greater detail than Luke does what the brunt of his preaching amounted to. While calling everyone to repentance, he was particularly scathing of the Pharisees and the Sadducees, for their self-righteous demeanour, telling them: “You snakes, who told you that you could escape from punishment. Do those things that show you have turned away from your sins. And don't think that you can escape punishment by saying that Abraham is your ancestor. I tell you that God can take these stones and make them into descendants for Abraham. The axe is ready to cut down trees at their roots, - every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptise you with water to show that you have repented, but the one who comes after me, will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. He is much greater than I am, and I am not good enough to carry his sandals. He has the winnowing shovel with him to thresh out all the grain. He will gather the wheat in his barn, but he will burn the chaff in a fire that never goes out.”

Having it in like this for those who made themselves out to be paragons of the Law, St. Luke shows us the reaction of the crowd.

They came to John with the question: “What are we to do?”

They had been touched to the core of their being by his words. They knew themselves for what they were, - selfish, self-serving, cheats,

mountebanks, opportunists, shady dealers, prostitutes, roughnecks, standover men, and so on. They knew God would have an axe to grind with them, but was there any way of still saving themselves: - “What are we to do?”

If they'd come to the Pharisees and Sadducees they could have expected some very tough conditions of self-improvement, sacrifices that would need to be offered, a trial period of good behaviour before, grudgingly, they would be able to take a seat in the synagogue again. There would always be some residual stigma, that marked them as former low-life. There wasn't much joy in being a reformed sinner, but if push came to shove, they'd better find out what they were in for, so: “What are we to do?”

John's answer must have surprised them, for it did not look at what they'd been up to. He did not berate them for the immoral practices they'd engaged in, nor did he lay it on, so they'd feel burdened by guilt and shame. He told them that this was the first day of the rest of their lives, and to do something good with it, - to look to the future, and therefore if anyone had two tunics to share with the one who had none, and those who has something to eat, to do the same.

He told the tax-collectors: “From now on, I'm not caring what you did in the past, whatever evil, and how much you've hurt people, but from now on, in the future, here's what to do: “Don't extort more than you are supposed to collect.” And to the soldiers, no matter how much brutality and pillage and rape they'd done in the past: “Look to the future. Do not bully people and don't hurt others, be content with your pay.” In other words, he told people to be generous, to be fair, and to be satisfied with what they had. It's a fairly simple program, but it is one that leads to a caring and harmoniously living community.

And that is what God asks of us, - not to let the past shadow us, but by doing the good we can here and now, to lift the burden of the past, and build together on a world where the finger of God can be seen, - where the joy spoken of in our first two readings can truly become a tangible thing, ready for whatever coming of Christ we focus on, - at Christmas, at the end of life, or at the end of time.