



Sunday 15th December 2024

Advent 3

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 3:7-18

The Rev'd Canon Jenny Wilson

In the name of God, creating, redeeming, sanctifying, ... Amen.

Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote a book entitled *Silence and Honey Cakes* in which he reflected on the ancient wisdom of the desert mothers and fathers who lived in the Egyptian desert mainly in the 4th and 5th centuries AD. The title is a joy in itself; those of us who imagined those ancient mystics to live very austere lives will be surprised to read of two of the desert Fathers each in a boat.

In one of them sat Abba Arsenius and the Holy Spirit of God in complete silence. And in the other boat was Abba Moses, with the angels of God: they were all eating honey cakes.¹

Rowan Williams reflects on these images of the praying life, pointing out that we pray in such different ways, there are 'real differences in people's callings and giftings. Silence and honey cakes are not competing achievements.' What matters is that we find our vocation in the praying life, our way nurtured by God of pondering our gifts and our frailties, our way of approaching the call made by that desert prophet of Jesus' time, his cousin and forerunner, John the Baptist.

It was locusts and wild honey that fed him, it was camel's hair and a belt that were his clothing. John the Baptist's exhortation to those who followed him, and, as we ponder his leading us, his exhortation to *us*, is to repentance. Repent, he said. He didn't exactly win his hearers over with flattery or encouragement. 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance.'

'Bear fruits worthy of repentance'. Are his words to us, too.

As we gather on this Third Sunday of Advent, with John the Baptist still as our guide, I thought we would wonder about repentance, wonder about the praying life and that we would allow Rowan Williams to be our guide. I doubt he would call us a brood of vipers, but his searing insight can be equally challenging. Like John and Jesus, Rowan Williams speaks the truth, encourages us to sit with the

¹Rowan Williams *Silence and Honey Cakes*, Medio Media edition, 2003, pp42-3.

truth, but always in the knowledge that this is where the God of love is to be found, if we can bear it.

So, the praying life. If we are to inspired by the desert mothers and fathers, the first thing we might ponder is the story of the two desert fathers each in a boat, one in complete silence, one eating honey cakes. If we are to hear John's exhortation to repent, this means a time of reflection, of prayer, of pondering. What is our way? We might first of all wonder. How best do we pray?

In the garden in silence watching the birds? By the sea? With the scriptures held in our hands a just one verse wafting through our thoughts? How best do we pray? Is it with honey cakes and a pot of tea? God will have woven into us our way, our unique way, our vocation in the praying life.

What would lead us to repentance? Rowan Williams looks at many sayings of the desert mothers and fathers. This is the one that most shocked me.

John the Dwarf wrote the following:

We have put aside the easy burden, which is self accusation, and weighed ourselves down with the heavy one, self-justification.²

Rowan Williams describes this as "very counter intuitive". He goes on:

Self-justification is the heavy burden because there is no end to carrying it; there will always be some new situation where we need to establish our position, dig the trench for the ego to defend. But how on earth can we say that self-accusation is a light burden? We have to remember the fundamental principle of letting go of our fear. Self-accusation, honesty about our failings, is a light burden because whatever we have to face in ourselves, however painful is the recognition, however hard it is a times to feel we have to start all over again, we know that the burden is already known and accepted by God's mercy. We do not have to create, sustain and save ourselves; God has done, is doing and will do all. We have only to be still ...³

We would rather put all our efforts into the heavy burden of establishing our worth. And it is a heavy burden because it comes from the failure to live out of God's love for us. Self-accusation, honesty about our failings, is a light burden because ...we know that the burden is already known and accepted by God's mercy. Here we have Rowan Williams more than hinting at the efforts we will go to to avoid ourselves and the failings within ourselves, and here we have him hinting at God's presence waiting there for us. Not comfortable, but welcoming us into the truth, where, as Jesus says, we will find freedom.

² *Silence and Honey Cakes*, p47.

³ *Silence and Honey Cakes*, p48.

It is often said that repentance is about turning away from our sins. I wonder if Rowan Williams is in fact encouraging us, firstly, in the opposite direction. The light burden about which he writes, that self-accusation, that honesty about our failings is more about turning towards our sins. Sitting with them, ‘accepted’, as Rowan Williams says, ‘by God’s mercy’. It is a painful place, a view of ourselves which can bring great discomfort. But only then, from that place of truth, can we arise, washed clean, forgiven and blessed and walk on knowing the love and mercy of God.

It is interesting this Third Sunday of Advent, that as we have John the Baptist’s words “You brood of vipers!” ringing in our ears, we also have woven into our reflection two readings that speak of joy. An interesting juxtaposition we might think.

The prophet Zephaniah speaks of as response of joy :

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away the judgements against you, he has turned away your enemies. ... The Lord, your God, is in your midst, ... he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; At that time [God says], I will bring you home.

Joy in the taking away of judgement, forgiveness in other words, joy in God bringing us home.

Paul, writing to the people of Philippi, encourages rejoicing in all things, however difficult they might be.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything ...

And gazing around us in our Cathedral dressed in Advent purple, a pink candle in our Advent wreath and our pink vestments remind us this *Gaudate* Sunday that our reflections on repentance take place in the midst of whisperings of joy. How can that be? How is it that as we honestly ponder our sins and our weaknesses, that there is rejoicing in the wings?

During Lent, as it happens, a number of years ago, our spiritual guide Rowan Williams spoke in an interview about times of reflection, Lent or Advent, or any other time when we find ourselves in boats, perhaps, in silence, eating honey cakes, whatever it might be, that helps us glimpse God. He was speaking about Jesus’ reflection time, Jesus in the desert. He seems to be hinting that repentance and joy might not be strangers to one another. He said this:

Jesus in the desert ... looks towards God and there’s nothing there that will solve a problem, nothing there that will sweep away all the questions. What

there is is truth and love and patience and changeless welcome. In due course that will transform us, it will bring us to joy, it will make our problems ... fade away. But first of all we have to get used to a new climate, we have to breathe a new air, ... the air of the Holy Spirit ... [we have to] get used to the idea of God quite different from what we expected and yet at the same time ringing bells with what we most care about and most deeply long for.⁴

The air of the Holy Spirit will transform us, will bring us to joy, will make our problems -and our sins - fade away ... as we get used to the idea of God quite different from what we expected and yet at the same time ringing bells with what we most care about and most deeply long for.

⁴ #BigRead13: "Why study C.S.Lewis for Lent" with Rowan Williams *YouTube* video, 7.22. Jan 30, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K1zBmmyVo0c>.