

# God's Promise of Dignity

The Revd Andrew Rampton

The Third Sunday of Advent | 15 December 2024

## Readings

Zephaniah 3:14–20; Cantic 3 (Isaiah 12:2–6); Philippians 4:4–7; Luke 3:7–18

## God's Inescapable Promise

Genesis 1:31

One of the promises of our reconciliation with God through the Messiah is the recognition of the dignity of every human being. A revelation of the worth that each person contains, not because their peers have judged them so, but because they exist. Each human being is part of the creation that God has wrought and declared good and very good. So central is this promise to our visions of the new creation that it forms part of our baptism. We ask each person baptized into Christ, and the rest of us renew the promise regularly, "Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?"<sup>1</sup> This notion of inherent worth makes some ideas impossible to reconcile with Christianity. Ideas such as slavery or the inferiority of those with customs, language, and skin unlike our own. We collectively continue to repent of the many times that we have held and enacted these ideas, failing to recognize and serve Christ in our neighbours and to respect their dignity.

For those with whom Jesus spent so much time—sex workers, tax collectors, orphans, widows, the chronically ill, and so on—the promise of a recognition of their dignity is a great hope. They will finally be known for who they really are: beloved children of God. However, for those who have enriched themselves at the expense of these others, the coming of the Messiah is cause for concern. If the dignity and worth of all will be revealed, then those who have exploited their neighbour will have some difficult explaining to do. On hearing John the Baptist preaching about the need for repentance, a changing of heart and turning toward God, in advance of the Messiah's arrival, many felt convicted to take action. Many more, however, sought ways to avoid the advent of the Christ.

Seeing this frightened searching for loopholes among the crowd, John addresses them as a brood of vipers. They are selfish, angry, venomous, and darting about like small snakes. They seek to escape what is to come, but the Forerunner of Christ, John the Baptist, assures them that there is no avoiding this encounter. Some think they can hide. No chance. Some think their ancestry will save them, being of Abraham's line surely puts them in better stead with Abraham's God than the Gentiles. John assures them that God can add to the covenant and lineage of Abraham in any way God sees fit so, no, their family trees will not win them any leniency either. The only hope, when divine judgement arrives, is to show the fruit of repentance in their lives.

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<sup>1</sup>*Book of Alternative Services*, p. 159

## Do You Turn to Christ?

Luke 3:10, 12, 14 As happens when Luke is writing about divine arrivals,<sup>2</sup> someone asks, “What then should we do?” What does this fruit of repentance look like? John is clear in his elaboration: Repentance is much more than a feeling or a series of thoughts. Repentance has a concrete, active component. Clothe the naked and feed the hungry. Do not exploit your position to become wealthy at the expense of others. Be content with what you have and do not seek to take from others what you have not earned. Selfishness, hoarding, exploitation, and the turning of a blind eye to the needs of your neighbour are not the fruits of repentance. Generosity, contentment, and justice are.

There is a criticism to be made, validly, I think, that in many corners of Protestant Christianity the faith has been presented primarily as something accomplished from the neck up. It is a set of ideas to be considered, propositions to be debated and either assented to or disagreed with. Salvation is found in accumulating as many facts about Jesus as possible and understanding what this Christianity business is all about. As though we might think our way into redemption. Or that we might repent by correcting past thoughts that we now realize were in error.

To be sure, learning about God is an important part of Christian life. We draw from the deep well of wisdom from our ancestors in the faith and use their experiences and the truths they have discerned as ways of entering into the mystery of life in Christ. We see God revealed to us daily by reading the Bible and reflecting on what it is we know of God through holy scripture. But, the interior spiritual life and the life of the mind are not the only parts of being Christian. When we baptize someone into Christ, one of the questions put to them is, “Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Saviour?”<sup>3</sup> At that point in the liturgy, the baptizand turns, physically, from facing the world through the doors of the church building toward the altar and tabernacle. They physically move their body to look at the primary symbols of Christ in our midst and declare their acceptance of him as their Saviour. There is an interior movement that is matched with a physical one and this is no accident. Just as John the Baptist explains to the crowd, a change of heart is visible in a change of posture, a change of behaviour.

## The Dignity of Every Human Being

This exchange between John the Baptist and the soldiers, tax collectors, and others in the crowd is not the only place where scripture reminds us of the connection between the posture of our hearts and the posture of our bodies.

James 2:14-17 There is the famously contentious section from the Letter of James stating that faith without works is dead. But Jesus himself, on many occasions, makes this connection for us. In John 14:12, Jesus says, “...the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these...” and just three verses later, “If you  
John 14:15 love me, you will keep my commandments.” At the feeding of the multitude in both Matthew and John, Jesus makes the dignity of the crowd who the disciples would dismiss known by showing compassion and generosity of God in action. Rather than explain to the disciples how they ought to help the hungry group, Jesus simply blesses the small collection of food and orders the disciples to distribute it. Even those who come to know the Lord unprepared for what it entails have their inherent worth recognized in word and deed.

Rather than a disagreement about whether faith or works are the more important ingredient in Christian life, I think there is a point being made about the relationship between these two facets. Sometimes, we come to believe or grow in faith by doing as we are called to do, as with the disciples and the feeding of the multitude. On the other hand, if we truly believe as we say we do, it will influence the way we behave, like the soldiers and tax collectors with John, reconsidering their conduct with their neighbours.

This inclusion of soldiers and tax collectors in the crowd is no accident on the part of Luke. The greater part of the assembled crowd is surely average, every day Judeans, but the prominence of these groups is important. Soldiers

<sup>2</sup>This same question is posed to Peter in Acts 2:37. His response is the same as that of John the Baptist here: Repent.

<sup>3</sup>*Book of Alternative Services*, p. 154

were a sign of the oppression of Rome. Foreigners occupying the land, taking from its produce for themselves and a far-off emperor, a regime enforced by soldiers who used their status to extort a people already oppressed. The average Judean probably did not think much of the dignity of Roman soldiers. But tax collectors occupied an even lower status. Tax collectors were often Judeans themselves who had taken up work on behalf of the oppressor, exploiting their neighbours to enrich themselves and the enemy who had conquered the land. Even worse than occupying foreigners, tax collectors were traitors.

Luke 19:9-10 And yet, here are the soldiers and tax collectors, alongside the Judeans they exploit and oppress, receiving the same advice from John. Repent and turn to the Lord. Echoing the story of Zacchaeus, we are reminded that the Good News is for everyone. In God's kingdom there is dignity for all, even exploiters, oppressors, and traitors. Of course, Malachi 3:2 that which does not have a place in the kingdom will not be admitted. Like a refiner's fire and fuller's soap, the final judgement will clear away everything that is not ready for perfect communion with God and leave it behind. Those who have not repented and changed the posture of their hearts and bodies will have a lot more cleaning up to do.

Critical to this understanding of repentance and the recognition of the dignity of every human being is seeing our own worth. We cannot give what we do not have and if we believe, deep in our heart of hearts, that we are not worthy, not valued, not truly loved by God, we will have a terrible time trying to honour our promises to our neighbours. Repentance is more than a feeling and, when we begin to behave like those who believe what we say, we will treat ourselves and our neighbours in a different way. We will find there is so much more grace for us than we thought possible, both from God and from our neighbours.

We may have a different sense of the urgency of John's call to repentance than the crowd Luke describes. After all, John knew his cousin was coming along very soon. Our timeline for the second coming of Christ is less clear. But what remains true is that the call to repentance is a call to give our faith a concrete expression. A change in our hearts, our words, and our actions is the fullest experience of our faith. As we do the hard work of changing our posture inwardly and outwardly we will more clearly see the God-given dignity of our neighbours and ourselves. In these moments, though we do not know the day or time of its coming, we will see glimpses of God's kingdom.

For the gift of a Messiah who has come to make this possible and who will come again to perfect this work, thanks be to God.