

This morning we had a good, old fashioned, hell fire and brimstone sermon from the lips of one of the best ever at the genre, John the Baptist. "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? God can raise children of Abraham up out of these stones and if you think I'm harsh, wait 'll you see the one who comes after me!"

I've sometimes wondered what it would be like to have enough acid in my belly to preach like that. But, alas, it's just not the Anglican way. Once, when, I was a curate, at Saint Luke's, Metuchen NJ, a parishioner mentioned by way of criticism that the Rector and I had never preached fire and brimstone. I tried to accommodate him; I told him to go to hell, but even that small amount of fire did not seem to satisfy.

I've been profoundly influenced by my mother who believes in positive thinking, so rather than bludgeon people with guilt, I would prefer calling people, or perhaps on a good day inspiring them, to more godly living. This is not to say that I am unmoved by passionate preaching, John the Baptist must've been something to behold, and it is unlikely that 1st century Jews would've been looking for a Messiah were it not for John and others like him who knew how to raise the spiritual barometer. But nonetheless, when the name calling and the threats are set aside, I want to look at his message and see what positive meaning I can draw from it, and I'm pleased to say that I found it quite fruitful.

John gave 3 instructions: "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none" to tax collectors he said "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." and to soldiers he said, "Do not extort money from people by threats or false accusations." As I considered these admonitions I realized that they could easily be stated as 3 virtues: generosity, honest and fairness. John commends these 3 virtues to his hearers and to us. And they're obviously good things, but now I'm going to turn them around and perhaps come as close to fire and brimstone as I ever do.

Regarding the first, think back to the last time you had an opportunity to be generous with someone. Looking back, are you comfortable with your level of generosity? Regarding the second, think back to the last time you were something less than truthful. How do you feel about that now? How long ago

was it? Regarding the third, can you think back to a time when you manipulated someone by using your position or some other means?

Advent is a penitential season when it is appropriate to probe our spiritual well being. And yes, this Rose Sunday which means we should lighten the mood a bit. But John was the one who showed up calling us all a brood of vipers. My point is not only to draw out positive themes of generosity, honesty, and fairness from his preaching, but also to ask each of us to reflect on these virtues and the extent to which we live them, or need to repent for lack of them.

I'll leave the rest of the brimstone to other, more fiery preachers.