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Introduction

John's appearance as the harbinger of a new Age provokes a response not simply within a circumscribed group, but one which spirals out to include female and male, young and old, rich and poor, urbanites and rural dwellers. However John's reception of those coming for baptism is not uniform and raises various questions about privileged assumptions and about what constitutes a properly engaged response.

Anchor question

What different sorts of groups do you belong to? Does membership of those groups contribute to your sense of identity in any way, and if so, how?

Text

Matthew 3:1–12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptised by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Comment

In the Christian tradition, baptism is strongly equated with both entry into a new community and, under the influence of Paul, the assumption of a new identity. However such immersion as it was widely practiced throughout the Mediterranean in Antiquity was connected primarily with ritual purification and not with initiation. This certainly seems to have been the purpose of the baptism offered by the Elijah-like figure of John, and his clarion call to repentance before the imminent arrival of judgement draws a diverse mix of people out into the desert to participate in the rite.

The first thing which we should note here is that all those who make the journey are responding to John's message at some level: the Pharisees and Sadducees are not merely coming to gape or question – everything indicates that they too were seeking baptism from him. However his response to them is anything but welcoming and the very particular forms which his invective takes in verses 7 and 9 give a hint as to why this might be so.

Serpent imagery in 2nd Temple Judaism can be ambiguous but there is absolutely no doubt as to its tenor in verse 7. The term 'brood of vipers' occurs 3 times in Matthew (3:7; 12:34; 23:33) and always in connection with a Pharisaic pericope. Some of this polemic is almost certainly related to the dynamic we explored last week where the text functions at a meta-level as an instrument of Community definition, and thus to Matthew's positioning of the Jewish Christian community over and against that of Pharisaic Judaism in the immediate aftermath of the first Jewish war. However there are other resonances here too and the specificity of the image, particularly when taken in conjunction with other elements of the passage, hints at something else – a different aspect of community identity and its associated dynamic – which underlies John's hostile response.

Writers such as Pliny and Herodotus evidence a widespread tradition in the ancient Mediterranean world that vipers were born by eating their way out through their mother's stomach, killing her in the process. John's use of imagery strongly associated with parricide is thus in stark contrast to the Pharisees own self-professed pride in their descent from Abraham and *zukunft* 'avot...the 'merits of the fathers' which they believed thus accrued to them. John's ironic inversion of this hints at his belief that their actions actually destroy, rather than honour that lineage. His further comment that God could, if he wanted, raise up 'Children of Abraham' from the surrounding stones underlines their folly in a different way: their assumption that their membership of a certain community gives them particular claims and rights is totally misplaced. The stern injunction to 'bear fruit worthy of repentance' which links these two barbs adds another pointer towards the underlying problem: the motif of bearing 'fruit' (*karpos*) is a common one in Matthew and usually depicts an outward sign of an inner reality. It is this, rather than any ancestral or religious lineage which designates those who stand in a right relationship with God.

Here then we approach the nub of the issue: The baptism which John preaches and practices is a ritual of purification that signifies but does not in itself effect forgiveness. Repentance – *metanoia* – involves a change of direction, and forgiveness from God follows on the active cleansing of the inner life by the practice of virtue – the outward indication of an inner change: 'it's fruit discloses the cultivation of the tree; so a person's speech discloses the cultivation of his mind' (Sirach 27:6).

John's disgust seems to turn on two key points – his comments imply firstly that there is an element of deliberate calculation in the Pharisees presentation of themselves for baptism; and secondly an assumption on their part that their membership of a particular group excuses them from anything but engagement at the ritual level of repentance. Thus we come to the second of the paradoxes which this year's advent Gospels bring to light: in the Kingdom of God, a publicly, politically, or religiously privileged position is not a get out of jail free card but, on the contrary, can be a positive hindrance to understanding and becoming engaged with its meaning, life and work.

This is something which can be just as relevant and as critical in the context of the different struggles or conflicts in which we might be involved: there is sometimes a temptation to believe that our membership of a certain group – whether that be related to gender, ethnicity, political, social or religious understandings – privileges or protects us in some way; or that it excuses us from the effort of making a committed attempt to try and understand another perspective, or of a serious engagement with the thought and action required to move things forward. Often these assumptions are unconscious or unexamined – and when such such blind spots held up to us (whether gently or with the harshness of John) we need to be prepared to let go of our reflex tendency to 'circle the wagons' or 'defend the

redoubt' and instead to critically examine our attitudes and their underlying bases and biases.

Response

Are there situations where you see membership of a group as excusing you from having to do certain things; or as excusing you from the necessity for examination of/explanation of certain understandings or patterns of behaviour – particularly with respect to others? Write short letters to a friend and to a stranger justifying that stance. Then imagine yourself as the recipient of such a letter – how do you respond to the arguments?

For further thought:

If we want to preemptively engage with a situation – particularly one which involves conflict of some kind – how do we find a balance between proper preparation which respects the nature of the situation and others involved in it, and a self-serving calculation whose priority is our own interests?

Prayer

A collect.

Jesus – the setter-aside of security,

You did not stand upon the privileges of Sonship
but instead took the pathway of service.
May we never use our own belongings
as a route for distancing ourselves from responsibilities,
but instead follow you more closely on the road of descent,
and so discover the paradox
that it leads upwards to the heart of God.

Amen
