

**Weekly Reflection**  
**Advent 3C, 2021**  
**12 December**  
**Zephaniah 3:14-20, Luke 3:7-18**

**Bruce Bennets**

**Are you awake – introit**

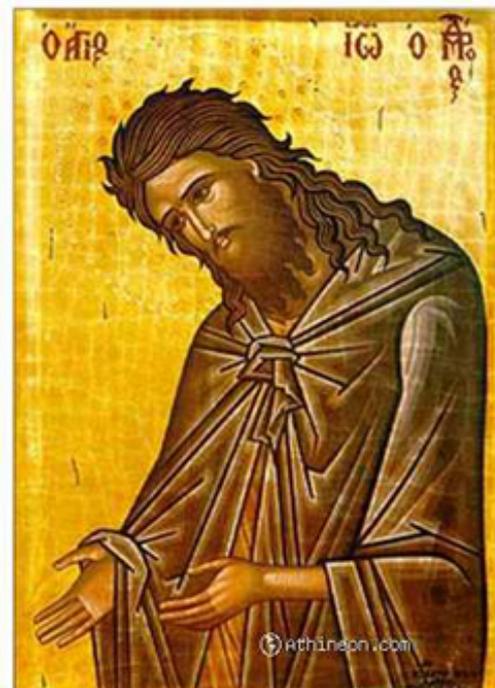
“Are you awake, really awake? Most people are asleep, including most people within the church and we will sleep through our whole life. I am trying to awake up and I wouldn’t be so bold to say I am awake but I am trying”. How do we wake up spiritually?

Is there purpose in waking up? Is it better to stay asleep? Waking up shows that we are connected to the divine in a loving dance? Staying asleep means that we continue to live with our fears and sense of lostness. The eastern faith traditions are probably better than western Christianity. They have a better understanding of contemplation and more experience in mediation. The word Buddha means “I am awake.” It is recorded in all the synoptic gospels that Jesus told us to stay awake and to be aware. But awareness is not something that just means thinking about things carefully or being really conscious. The Buddhists speak of objectless consciousness, where we are not conscious of anything in particular. It is a panoramic, receptive awareness whereby you take in all that the situation, the moment, the event offers, without eliminating anything. That type of awareness really does not come naturally to us. We have to work at it! All forms of meditation and contemplation are teaching us some way to calm our thinking mind. Normally our mind keeps jumping from observation to observation, thought after thought, feeling after feeling, most of which mean very little. As you can see, I am keen to explore the opportunities in this advent season about how can we start to wake up and become aware. Meditation and contemplation are important in this process and this might become the theme for one of the micro churches for those interested.

**Reflection**

In my reflection today I would like to look at the passage from Luke which is about John the Baptist. John the Baptist was very concerned about repentance.

I am not a Greek scholar, but I am reliably informed by Richard Rohr. I had to get some mention of Richard Rohr into my reflection otherwise Fiona and my children would be saying “what have you done with the real Bruce and that aliens have kidnapped their father”. Anyway, Richard Rohr says the Greek word in the New Testament that is translated as “repent” should be thought of as “turn around your mind” or “changing your thinking”. John the Baptist and Jesus were change agents. They wanted us to look at the world differently, to be awake to the presence of the God, the reign of God.



It is interesting that John is quoted as saying “I baptise you with water but one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barns, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” and with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news.” Luke is an interesting character and perhaps he was a bit of joker. At one moment he is talking about unquenchable fire and then in the same sentence he is saying “and John went about preaching the good news! “ That is good news – winnowing forks and unquenchable fire! I must admit I am always a bit concerned about this type of imagery in the New Testament, the separating the wheat from chaff or separating the sheep from the goats. It seems to be going against the grain of the rest of Jesus’s message of a God who loves us as we are.

It is impossible to describe God fully in language and written words though this is our limitation. Analogies are helpful, and Jesus, John, Paul and the writers of the scriptures are frequently using them to talk about God and saying “the reign of God is like”, though all analogies fall down at some point or even lose their direct relevance as times changes. They never fully contain the whole. They can’t, as God is mystery and too large for our human minds. We do need to move beyond words and thoughts, and to let go to experience God. This is where mediation and contemplation are very helpful.

As is often the case in the Scripture, agricultural analogies such as the sheep and the goats or fig trees or vines and vineyards, are used as these would have been directly relevant to the listeners and understood by the people of the time though they are more remote or obscure to us. In the Luke passage today, we are talking about wheat and the chaff.

Here is a bit of stray wheat that has grown up in my garden as I used straw from the chicken hut as mulch on this garden and it contained wheat seeds. I could use this scenario for a different parable of the sower scattering the seeds but I had better stick to the wheat and chaff. When thinking about wheat and chaff it is easy to fall into the trap of dualistic think and we humans are very keen on dualistic thinking and particularly us in the Church. There are good people and bad people, there is a right way and a wrong way; or to quote some politicians, you are either for us or against us. Often we need to take a “neti neti” approach, which is a Sanskrit saying of “not this and not that” or another way is to say “this and that”. In this passage it is easy to think of the wheat as being good and the chaff as being bad or not wanted, and one level that is right but as is often the case, there is more to it. When you think about it could the wheat exist if it weren’t for the stems and leaves that nourished and supported it. There would have been a time when the stem and the leaves and the roots would have been the most important part of the plant. They allowed the wheat to form and to ripen. But there comes a time when the stem and the leaves have done their work and now it is the time of the wheat and not the chaff. I believe what Luke is saying is that we are like the wheat, that throughout our lives there are times for the stems and leaves and then there comes a time for us to separate from them and for the wheat to be revealed.

There is a time for us, particularly in the first half of life. We need to build our independence or our separateness. It is through the development of our ego that we build this independence. We need to develop our egos, it is natural. We need to be able to see the world through individual eyes and to have ambitions. We need our stems, leaves and roots. Perhaps another way of looking at it is through a more modern analogy of constructing a large multi storey building. To do this we need to erect scaffolding. It is there to support the growing structure. It is there to protect us and make it easier to build. Our egos are like the scaffolding, they are useful, important and even essential but they aren’t the real building. As

in all building projects there comes a point when we need to take down the scaffolding to see the beauty of the building beneath.

In our case as humans we need to see our separateness as really an illusion, and we need to start letting go of our egos. We need to see that we are one with the divine. Paul is constantly reminding us that we are one with Christ. However, our egos are desperate to maintain the illusion that we are separate from the divine. This is what the 20<sup>th</sup> century mystic, Thomas Merton calls the false self. Letting go can be very hard as we become familiar and dependent on the scaffolding even though it doesn't bring us joy. We can think that the scaffolding or the ego is the real building or the real us or the true self. Jesus was a very good psychologist and used it is throughout his ministry. He understood the human psyche though he wouldn't have recognised the term. We are fortunate now to have the science and language to start grasping what Jesus knew intuitively. We need to see through the illusion of separateness and realise or rejoice in the knowledge we have always been part of God, the oneness of creation. This is why the Gospel writers keep saying the reign of God is here and now and not in the future. I think this is what the prophet Zephaniah was saying when he wrote "The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing". Though I think the readers of that time would have been considered in a very tribal way in those days and not the all-embracing way that we need to see God as Christ in all things. Now back to our passage from Luke, with the winnowing fork and the unquenchable fire and this being Good News.



I believe John and Jesus are not saying there are good and bad people, some deserving of eternal punishment but rather they are talking about what is inside of us, each of us. There are things that we need to let go of, or to use their language, burn away with unquenchable fire. Sadly through church history it has been much easier and less troubling for us to think that there are bad people who need to be sent to hell and burnt in Dante's eternal inferno than to surrender parts of ourselves to the unquenchable fire.

This is my unquenchable fire, our fire pit though sadly I think the rain in coming days will easily quench this fire. But God is

always willing to help sort out and burn away our hubris, our chaff, our scaffolding. God never tires, and never says it is too much work, God is always patient, even when we desperately cling to our chaff or hubris or our egos, both individually and collectively, particularly in the church.

An important corollary of letting go, is the need to hold things lightly. It is much easier to let go of something if it is held lightly. There are often good reasons why we do things in certain ways or believe certain ways of seeing the world or interpreting scripture in a particular way, or how we run our meetings or organise our church or run worship; these become our traditions that build us up. But often there comes a time when we need to, to quote Elsa from the animated film Frozen, to "let it go". It is so much easier if we hold these things lightly but often we doggedly hold onto something that is to our detriment. I would encourage us to hold most things lightly, trusting in the spirit that what is important will remain.

What is the chaff that we need to let God kindly burn away for our congregations.

What do we at Northmead need to burn away?

What do we at Centenary need to pull down?

What do we at Westmead need to let go of ?

What are the traditions and habits that we at Leigh are holding on to that stops seeing the real building and our oneness with God.

What are we as individuals and congregations holding onto? What are our traditions, habits and ways of thinking that God would kindly burn for us? Perhaps God is already doing this via the pandemic, giving us a helping hand because we are slow to do this ourselves. I do believe that suffering has a big part to play in letting go of things. Finally we do need to harvest the wheat of our lives and to use it. For what is the use of wheat if it is not eaten or grown into more plants! Are we using the wheat of our lives?