

**SERMON: 2018/12/09 (2nd Sunday Advent, Yr. C - Track 1) -  
*Malachi* 3:1-4; 'The Song of Zechariah'; *Philippians* 1:3-11; and, *Luke*  
3:1-6\_BTR**

[Invite children to the front. Have to hand a bag of large potatoes.]

[Remove a potato from the bag and hold it up.]

I have in my hand a large, brown, hard, lumpy vegetable.  
Specifically, a "tuber."  
Native to America.

But what, exactly, is it?

[Wait for response.]

*That's right!*  
A "potato."

Now, do you know any "nicknames" for potatoes?  
Maybe a short(er) term.

[Wait for response.]

Well, in England, in the north, sometimes this is called, quite simply, "a tater."  
Which reminds me of something about discipleship - you could call it a principle  
or "ingredient" - that was important to Jesus, our Savior, and His close friend,  
Saint Paul: [Pause.]

Many Christians are happy - content - to be just *spec*-tators.  
That means all they want to do, really, is watch others - watch others give time  
and money and energy to the mission of the Church, to "The Gospel."  
Like watching (holiday-season) football on T. V.  
They'd rather sit back and let others take the risks.  
But Jesus called each one of us to be much more than just a *spec*-tator.

[Throw potato to a member of the congregation.]

*Some* Christians get this, and do considerably better.  
Many priests, for example.  
Bishops, evangelists and others.

They love to talk, talk, talk about the Gospel, which is very important: Jesus told His disciples to *share* the "Good News" with everyone, and not keep it to ourselves: [e.g. Mt. 11:4, 28:7, 10; Mk. 5:19, etc., etc.]

But talking, by itself, isn't enough.

You need to prove your beliefs - your confidence in Christ with *action*.

People who *only* talk are *commen-tators*.

[Throw potato to a member of the congregation.]

No, Jesus - and Paul - tell us to *copy* them - to copy them by telling our friends and neighbors - and even strangers - about the possibility of life-after-death by the power of the Cross, and then *showing* evidence of God's great love.

Yes, in this way, we're called to be *imi-tators*: [see: 2 Thess. 3:7].

[Throw potato to a member of the congregation.]

Let's pray: Father God, ..., in Jesus' name, amen.

[Ask children to leave.]

Last week, we took a very quick look at Paul's first letter to the *Thessalonians*, which, I told you, was an important city - a city of soldiers, of significant grain-exports - that sat along a very important road called the, "Via Egnatia." - Rome's grand highway from the Adriatic Sea, more than a thousand kilometres across the rugged Balkan peninsula to (what is today) Turkey in the East.

Well, today, we're afforded a glimpse at another of the Apostle's epistles, *Philippians*, which was written to a church in a city not far from Thessaly - not far at all, which sat, in fact, on the same, important route, but closer to the Middle East - to Paul's starting place on his mission of taking the Gospel to the northmen.

Thus, he went there first - as was logical, given its greater proximity to his point of departure - Antioch - and, as such, this is reflected in the fact that it also precedes *Thessalonians* in the Canon.

*Philippi* was a Roman colony, a place where they "dumped" their veterans, and there were very few Jews in the town; and so there wasn't a synagogue, which would have been the Saint's usual first "point of call." [n.1]

Instead, as Luke describes it in *Acts*, Paul and his group 'sat down' near the city-gate and struck up conversations as they could with passersby: [16:13].

And they had some great success.

Too much for the liking of the local pagan-religious leaders, who attacked the evangelists with thick wooden sticks, and had them imprisoned: [16:19b-23].

But this effort to silence the "Good News" backfired badly, Paul and his companions were sprung from prison by a miraculous earthquake, which then convinced even *more* people to believe the Christian message: [16:25-34].

And the new church 'became *very* [large and] eminent'. [n.2]

So much so, that, unlike the one we were discussing before in Thessaly, which needed as its first priority to 'increase', [1 Thess. 3:12] Paul writes and urges something else (entirely): that their 'love' - the love of the Philippians - would 'overflow' to all around them, [1:9] which is a lovely image. [Pause.]

In Yorkshire, where Rebekah, Poppy and I lived, there were canals everywhere - a remnant - a relic - of the nineteenth century "Industrial Revolution."

Now, if you don't know what a "canal" is, it is an artificial "river," straight-as-an-arrow, dug, originally, to carry flat-bottomed boats, transporting heavy raw materials like iron ore and coal.

These days, their traffic mostly consists of ducks, swans and the occasional toad; but I mention them because the water in them is *carefully* managed by sluice-gates.

These door-like mechanisms are used to control the height of the water in the canals and its velocity; and this means that the flow is always a steady, *plodding* one, perfect for fishermen and lazy Sundays.

And maybe this is how you express your love?

With restraint and reservation.

"Hedging your bets."

Proportioned out to just a few people - immediate relatives and children only; the odd friend.

And if this is true (about you), I'd argue, therefore, that your love is trapped - *trapped* behind an ungodly "sluice-gate."

And this isn't some modern problem - although it may be acutely bad now:

Reading "between the lines," I believe that there may have been a period in the life of John the Baptist, for example, where his love for others - for "The Neighbor;" for "The Stranger" - was also "bottled up;" unexpressed:

If we take as a single whole the various things that are said about him in all of the gospels, we find that, quite clearly, John was, as an adult, a sort of "monk" - monasteries, of course, wouldn't be invented for many centuries yet, but he is introduced to us as one who was definitely a hermit - living 'in the wilderness', that is, the desert: [Lk. 3:2].

Now, according to *Matthew* and *Mark*, John went there to carry out his peculiar ministry of immersing willing members of the public in the waters of the River Jordan 'for', as he describes it, 'the forgiveness of sins'. [Mk.1:4]

But notice how Luke puts it: he writes that John was *already* there *when* 'the word of God came to [him]' (instructing him to perform the ritual): [Lk. 3:2].

*Then*, we're told, 'He went...' - and goes to earn his nickname that we know him by: [v.3].

Can you see?

(Look again if you need to.)

Two different details, sequentially arranged to suggest chronological succession: one after the other:

He was already out there, then, *before* the baptising began because, conjecture many reputable scholars, he was the member of a *tiny* Jewish Doomsday group - you might say: "cult" - called the, "Essenes."

Now, we don't know much about them.

They were very secretive.

And what we might like to think we know comes to us thanks mostly to the historian, Josephus, who, though contemporaneous with the group, never *actually* met a member, and was probably relying on gossip and hearsay.[n.3]

Some parts of the "picture" have been supplied by archaeology, but not a great deal: there remain 'huge gaps'.[n.4]

*But*, having said all this, it seems that the Essene community, lived in a series of caves near the northern "tip" of the Dead Sea - a complex called "Qumran" - which I've mentioned before - and there were 'dormitories, a common dining hall, cisterns, and a scriptorium'.[n.5]

And they lived out in that inhospitable, harsh place to avoid, they hoped, like Amish, the corruption of Mainstream Society - the moral compromises of normal life.

They claimed that they were 'a new exodus'.[n.6]

And from their own writings and those that they kept of others, they were convinced that something *very* significant in regard to the End-of-the-World was about to happen *any* day.[n.7]

But despite having this *terrifying* conviction - of imminent, sweeping, *fiery* Divine Judgment, which *Malachi* described for us so *graphically* (in the Old Testament just now), they were content to be merely spectators; to be *passive*; to be "Watchers."

Indeed, they called themselves that in some of their mystical writing, (which is a little creepy).

And, accordingly, in *John* 1, the Baptist says about himself that he was only 'a witness': [v.7].

But of course, to us - to history, he becomes something so much more.

And this was because - as I know you know - he didn't stay where 'the word of God came to [him]' - *he couldn't(!)* - the word that he heard, whatever it was, gave him urgency, *purpose*:

His contemplative, solitary life was no longer sufficient, no longer adequate. As much as it was supposed to be about devotion to God it was exposed, unmasked as being, in fact, self-indulgent.

Which isn't to say that it was easy or fun.

We're told that he ate locusts for goodness sake!

That'd hardly *The Great Gatsby*.

Have you ever tried to catch one of those things?

A locust or a grasshopper.

As soon as you make up your mind to hit it with a shoe it jumps away like it was fired from the barrel of a gun: *bang!*

Off it goes: three metres per second *Wikipedia* tells me.

Imagine, then, trying to catch enough of those for three, "square" meals per day.

And 'wild honey'?

*Thrusting* your unprotected, ungloved hand into bees' nests?

Let's face it, John was probably painfully thin; the envy of supermodels everywhere.

But of what good was his lonely, unseen life to anyone else?

The only beneficiary of all that peace and quiet and meditation and insect-bites was John and John alone.

But the word of God that he received gave his life new meaning - *and a new pattern*.

And that 'word', unspecified in the text, was certainly about love.

I know this because this is the only thing that God ever speaks to His creation about.

After all, He cannot help it: He *is* love, right? [1 Jn. 4:8]

And every communication from Him - every message - whatever the "surface" details might be, flow from that - from His heart, even when, to us, it sometimes appears - at first - to be uncomfortably critical or challenging - such as his provocation to us this morning to let our love *overflow*.

Don't restrain it; don't reign it in.

Lavish your love on everyone around you.

Let's take a moment to reflect.

Footnotes:

1. Witherington, Ben, III (2011), *Paul's Letter to the Philippians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, Grand Rapids, M. I.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2-3.
2. Henry, Matthew (1839), *The Comprehensive Commentary on the Holy Bible: Acts-Revelation*, Brattleboro': Brattleboro' Typographic Company, 95.
3. See, for example: Horsley, Richard A. (July 1986), 'Popular Prophetic Movements At the Time of Jesus: Their Principle Features and Social Origins', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, Volume 9, No. 26, pp. 3-27, 4-5.
4. *Ibid.*, 16.
5. Kent, Homer A., Jr. (1962), 'The Qumran Community and New Testament Backgrounds', *Grace Journal*, Volume 3, No. 2, pp. 35-44, 35.
6. Horsley (1986), 10 & 16.
7. See: Horsley (1986), 8-10.