

- St Luke wrote in his Gospel about the forerunner, St John the Baptist, *'So with many other exhortations he proclaimed the good news to the people.'*
- What is this Good News that John the Baptist is proclaiming?
- And is it good news anyway? Here's a few other quotes from the same reading.
 - *'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?'*
 - *'Even now the axe 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.'*
 - *'the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'*
- Forgive me if I am missing something, but those sentences don't seem especially good news to me. We are all aware of the spin of politicians attempting to make uncomfortable news look like good news in disguise but one expects rather more from John the Baptist!
- So what does Good News look like? And how can we justify calling it Good News at all if these statements of John are to be taken seriously?
- First of all, then, what does Good News, the Good News of Jesus look like to a refugee?
 - Well, first, Jesus understands. He himself was born in a stable and fled with his parents as a young baby to Egypt, because of the jealousy of King Herod.
 - I guess a refugee would ask for somewhere safe to live in a community which enables them to settle. That would certainly be good news for them. And that is surely Jesus means when he quotes Isaiah as prophesying, *'he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.'* What could this Good News be, but relief from suffering? And what suffering could be more encompassing for a refugee than fleeing with nowhere to go and no welcome anywhere.
 - But, and this is something we as a benefice are discovering, having been given somewhere safe to live in a community that cares, it is still jolly hard work for refugees and requires great resources of determination and human resilience in order to be able to settle into this new life.
 - Perhaps that is where faith involves the Holy Spirit as well if we let him?
- Try another example. What does Good News look like to a farmer in a drought ridden area of Africa plagued with the effects of climate change?
 - Again, this might be deceptively simple to begin with. The most complete answer, the best news would surely be more reliable and predictable weather patterns that allowed farming traditions that had been going on for hundreds of years to continue. To bring the farmers' climate in Africa back to what it was when God created the world in the first place. He created it Eden. His Son was there at the beginning of time. He created it Eden and we spoiled it.
 - Removing the effects of climate change would be extremely Good News to virtually everybody except possibly Donald Trump who doesn't believe in it and whose profits would definitely be dented. But removing climate change also requires a super-human effort. A change in attitude and mind-set of the population of the whole world, including almost certainly the drought ridden farmer in Africa who would almost certainly be no different from you or I if he were a slightly more prosperous farmer.
 - *'Whoever has two cloaks must share with anyone who have none'*. I find that rather scary because I have about 5 coats if we include my gardening anorak and my cycling kagool.
 - But if you and I are not prepared to share our coat it will certainly never happen. And then *'the axe'* really is *'lying at the root of the trees'*.
 - This is not going to be a quick fix and will involve probably hundreds of years of much more restrained and managed use of energy by the population of the world at large. Or else a mass outbreak of *'the*

wrath to come' that John was predicting to the crowds at the Jordan in today's reading. And I know which I would prefer.

- So a shorter term fix, some 'Quite Good News' might be support to grow different more drought resistant crops, like the pigeon pea that was this diocese's Harvest appeal that we supported through Christian Aid.
- Let's have another example of this elusive term 'Good News. What would be Good News to someone who is guilt ridden and doesn't know what to do with their burden?
 - Here we are on more familiar ground! Jesus carried our sins on the cross so that we don't have to. He died so we can live a new life unburdened from the heavy weights and worries we try unsuccessfully to shoulder ourselves and carry around pretending it's all fine but secretly aching inside.
 - Jesus opened his arms wide on the cross to give us to invite us to lay all that secret rubbish down in front of him and enjoy the refreshing cool breeze of forgiveness brushing our cheeks.
 - Once again, it all seems deceptively simple, but in order to experience forgiveness, in order to forgive ourselves as much as anything else, we have to first admit a problem. In order to get out of that dark place you first have to admit you're in it. *'His winnowing fork in his hand, to clear the threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'*
 - Forgiveness is free, but you have to face up to it. If I've offended you, and I know I've offended you, but I carry on as if nothing has happened, you may forgive me in your heart, but there's always going to be something between us, and I will always know it's my fault. For forgiveness to be truly Good News, I've got to man up to it!
- One final example. What does Good News look like to someone who is grieving?
 - Here it is surely the resurrection that comes most strongly into play. Jesus has taken away the sting of death and given us the hope of everlasting life.
 - I'm grieving because I haven't got my dear soulmate by my side but with faith in Jesus the Good News is that it's not a permanent separation. The hope, and the greater you live your faith, the more sure the hope, is that one day we will be reunited in the fullness of the Kingdom of God, where Jesus has gone to prepare a place for us and where actually we'll be much closer than we ever were on earth..
 - The challenge is to allow that to permeate the midst of my self-obsessed sorrow.
- A few examples. We could come up with many more. But what seems to come out of this is that the Good News that John foretold, is intimately connected with Jesus. Focussed around his death, but much wider than that.
 - And that this Good News involves challenge, perhaps especially to people like us. To those who have two coats, let alone 5, it is the call to give 4 of them away and to experience the liberation that this brings. To those who have a lot to lose, it is the call to realise what is really important and the wonderful change of priorities that results. To those who think they have not done anything wrong, it is the shocking realisation that we are far away from God, and living far away from the way he calls us to live.
 - Good News is both judgement and joy, challenge and hope.
 - It is both present and future.
- You're down at the riverbank with John. You've lugged your 5 coats with you because you don't trust leaving them behind – who knows what might happen to them? What are you going to do with them now?
- You're down at the riverbank with John. You're aching with pain because you feel so alone since the funeral, but nobody else seems to care. You see the figure of Jesus walking on the other side of the river. Where are you going to go now?
- Challenge and hope. Judgement and joy. Have a great Advent and make a few decisions before the axe strikes. Amen!