


# Gospel Reflection Sunday December 15th 2024, Third Sunday of Advent

With Fr Brian Maher OMI

## SUNDAY GOSPEL REFLECTION

### *Third Sunday of Advent*

*Luke 3:10-18*



Today, maybe John the Baptist calls us to do the same as he did; to let go of our own false Gods and say that the one born in that stable is “more powerful than I am, the straps of his sandals I am not worthy to untie.”



- Fr Brian Maher OMI

Image: TLiesel, CC BY-SA 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons

**Gospel Reflection Sunday 15th December 2024, Third Sunday of Advent | Luke 3:10-18**

It is a sign of the greatness of John the Baptist that the Church dedicates two Sundays of Advent to him.

I always think it is a pity that we know so little about him. He is suddenly there baptising in the Jordan; he does the job he came to do – introduces Jesus to the people; and then he's gone, executed by King Herod.

In modern day language we would probably say that John lived 'an alternative lifestyle', meaning that he made no attempt to fit into the structures or mores of the society in which he lived. He chose to live at the edge of the desert, either alone or with a small community of like-minded individuals. He lived an austere and penitential life, eating only what he found in the desert (locusts and wild honey), and dressing in self-made, ragged, camel skin clothes held in place by a leather belt. He must have looked (and maybe smelled!) quite a sight. I always feel he must have been a great disappointment to his wonderful parents, Zachariah and Elizabeth. Zachariah was a priest, a respected member of society serving in the Temple. John, as a boy, would have begun his own training in the Law of Moses, with the intention of following his father into priesthood.

Elizabeth and Zachariah may have been too saintly to say anything, but secretly they must have been saddened by their son's life choice.

There was, of course, a reason why he lived in this way. It wasn't that he was 'odd' or 'a lazy drop-out'. The way he, and others like him, lived was intended to send a clear message to all in Israel. The message was simple: "you have moved away from the life you were called to live. You eat too much, drink too much and you are selfishly too comfortable. The Kingdom of God is coming very soon, and God better not find you living in sin, as you are now."

John the Baptist's clothes, his food, living in the desert, were a condemnation of how the Jewish people lived. Again, in today's language we would probably call him 'ultra conservative' or 'very far right' in his views. He wanted a strict observance to the Law of Moses – stricter even than the Pharisees, and they themselves lived in strict conformity to the Law.

Many of these individuals formed small communities in the desert, where they lived together, prayed, studied the Law and looked forward to the end of the World, which they saw as imminent. The finding of the now famous Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran told us much about their lifestyle.

John himself was not an Essene, though he may have had an association with them. Much of what he says and does echoes the beliefs of the Essenes. However, while they withdrew completely from society, forming their own communities deep in the desert, John lived much closer to civilisation and, most importantly, he felt called by God to loudly and publicly call people to repent and turn back to God while there still was time. He further invited those who heard him to show their repentance by coming into the river Jordan with him and being baptised. It was a public sign of repentance, visible to all present.

John must have been a hugely charismatic figure. No doubt his clothes, food and dwelling added to his brand, but his message, his call for repentance, touched a nerve among the people. Today's Gospel shows us this very strongly. The wide variety of people who came to see and hear him, and who then were baptised, is evidence of his appeal. The idea of Roman soldiers and hated outcasts like tax collectors even mixing with the wider crowd of Jews, let alone asking to be baptised by John, is amazing.

It would, I'm sure, have been wonderful to stand on the river bank and watch this strange man loudly exhort those present to repent or suffer the terrible consequences of not being ready when God comes with his Kingdom.

It is important, I think, to note that the God John believed in, the God who was coming very soon, was himself an austere and severe figure. Judgement and punishment in "*unquenchable fire*" are what he brings. There will be no place to hide from his "*winnowing fork*" so repentance and its public sign, baptism, are the only ways to be like "*the wheat, gathered into his barn.*"

I find it somewhat amusing that Luke calls this "*good news*"! The God described by John is not particularly attractive, and the demand for an utter and profound change of lifestyle in order to avoid the "*unquenchable fire*" seems a very negative reason to repent and turn back to God.

Without doubt, this image of God fits the lifestyle of John himself. John was austere and so was his God. John was severe in calling for repentance and so was his God. It is, perhaps, a good example of how all of us tend to 'create God in our image and likeness' rather than the other way around.

Staying with this thought for a few moments, it is well worth our while, I think, to reflect on our own image of God and try to work out in what ways this image reflects who we are rather than who God is. All of us can be so certain and dogmatic about what God is like and we can be so vocal in demanding that others accept our image of God. The truth, however, may well be that I am simply asking others to accept 'me' as the one who is God. What a frightening thought that is!

God is greater than all of us. We do not, and cannot, ever even begin to imagine the awesomeness of God. Humbly accepting this is an important step on our Spiritual journey and takes us a step closer to encountering the true God revealed by Jesus.

The amazing and almost incredible thing is that one person who walked among us does know what God is like. That person is Jesus. Only Jesus has the right and authority to create God in his own image and likeness because he is God!

If I want to know in human words what our God is like, all I need do is read the Gospels because in them the true God is revealed.

When Jesus says that God is like a father standing at the gate, always waiting to welcome his prodigal son home, we can be sure that this is true. When Jesus said to the woman taken in adultery, "*has no one condemned you? Then neither do I...*" we can be sure that this is truly what God also says to us. When Jesus says God is like the good shepherd seeking out the sheep who is lost, and who rejoices when the sheep is found, we can be sure that this is also what God is like – always seeking us, waiting for us to return, never content until we are home again, and then rejoicing that we are found.

What we must do is let go of all the Gods we create for ourselves, all the God we create in our own image and likeness. These are false Gods, and they blind us from seeing the loving magnificence of the true God.

It would be very foolish to think that we can do this easily. Our false Gods are deeply ingrained in us. Our pride demands that we keep them alive. To let them go leaves us vulnerable and fragile and maybe feeling a bit lost. However, it is only in letting them go that we create enough room within ourselves for the real God of Jesus to enter and touch us.

The tiny child, born in a stable two thousand years ago is God. That is what 'Incarnation' means. What this child, grown into a man, tells us about God is true, because this child, grown into a man is still God.

Christmas is a story beyond our understanding, but it is a true story. Is it too much to believe that the God who created all things in the Cosmos loves us enough to want to share their life with us? Of course it is too good to be true....but it is true!!!

This is the miracle of Christmas, not a God coming to judge and punish us, as described by John in today's Gospel, but a God of infinite love and forgiveness as revealed to us by the child born on Christmas day.

John was humble enough to recognise that the one coming after him was greater than he was. He let go of his own images of God to point us to Jesus.

Today, maybe John the Baptist calls us to do the same as he did; to let go of our own false Gods and say that the one born in that stable is "*more powerful than I am, the straps of his sandals I am not worthy to untie.*" When we do this, we can look at this child in a new way and we can, through him rather than through ourselves, see the true face of God.

How wonderful it would be to do this.

Many thanks,

Brian.

If you have any thoughts or comments that you would like to share with me on this reflection, please send me an email: [b.maher@oblates.co.uk](mailto:b.maher@oblates.co.uk)

## **Gospel Luke 3:10-18**

### **'Someone is coming who will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire'**

When all the people asked John, 'What must we do?' he answered, 'If anyone has two tunics he must share with the man who has none, and the one with something to eat must do the same.' There were tax collectors too who came for baptism, and these said to him, 'Master, what must we do?' He said to them, 'Exact no more than your rate.' Some soldiers asked him in their turn, 'What about us? What must we do?' He said to them, 'No intimidation! No extortion! Be content with your pay!'

A feeling of expectancy had grown among the people, who were beginning to think that John might be the Christ, so John declared before them all, 'I baptise you with water, but someone is coming, someone who is more powerful than I am, and I am not fit to undo the strap of his sandals; he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fan is in his hand to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his barn; but the chaff he will burn in a fire that will never go out.' As well as this, there were many other things he said to exhort the people and to announce the Good News to them.

---

#### **The Oblates are on social media:**

[Follow us on Facebook](#)

[Follow us on Twitter](#)

[Follow us on Instagram](#)

**Sign up to receive these reflections direct to your email inbox (this also includes a short introduction and some explanatory notes from Fr Brian):**

<https://oblates.ie/e-newsletter/>