

## Homily based on Luke 3: 7-18

### The Reverend David I. Giffen

I speak to you in the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

From the edge of the Jordan, the Baptist's cry is heard by both peasant and tax collector alike. As the masses come to the water to be baptized, John's harsh and direct proclamation calls the people of his time to repentance, for the forgiveness of their sins. John speaks clearly, and without reservation, to even the highest in authority, proclaiming that in God's world, justice will reign.

Can you imagine a political or religious leader speaking to their constituency in such a way? Can you imagine the furious response to a Member of Parliament screaming at the masses and referring to them as a 'brood of vipers?' I would imagine that I might see many of you walk out on my homily, if I were to address you in such a way.

Our politically correct, public relations driven, media savvy *way-of-life*, tells us, that we must find less harsh ways of getting our message across, because we wouldn't want to appear to be offending anyone's sensitivities, and often more importantly, we wouldn't want to lose control of our own public persona.

We as a society tend to be more interested in the preservation of image, rather than the content of message, so much so, that at times it appears as though the preservation of image, in fact, becomes the message.

If any of you have even glanced at CNN or CBC News during the last two weeks, you will have been inundated with coverage of the Tiger

Woods scandal. In typical North American fashion, after years of building an icon to be larger than life, the media has taken ample opportunity to tear down 'said icon,' and rip 'said icon' to shreds. Stories of extra-marital affairs and personal indiscretions have blanketed the television and internet with layers of new information by the hour.

But what amazes me, is that from the first days of reporting, and on every day since, the most prominent headlines were not actually about the indiscretions of the man himself, but how badly his PR Machine was handling them. Speculation of how quickly an apology should have been made, what information should have been released and when – in a classic example of North American life, the preservation of image, indeed has become the message.

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With no PR Machine to be heard of, John the Baptist spoke to the crowds and the authorities offering several radical themes in his message.

John begins by dismantling the claims of Jewish religious leaders, that neither by virtue of 'ritual correctness,' or by virtue of 'ancestry,' does one find God's favour; that no matter how religious one was, or how prominent a family one descends from, God's sovereignty is too vast, to be limited by such little things.

Echoing the sentiments of the prophet Isaiah, John proclaimed a far-reaching and counter-cultural message of social justice. A social revolution which did not merely 'call' the faithful, but 'required' them to feed those who were hungry, clothe those who were naked, and to those in positions of power, *demand*ed that they speak out against injustice, never abusing those who found themselves vulnerable.

To a community living in a time of self-preservation and an environment of greed, these words shattered the theology of people who believed they had been chosen by God. No longer could they sit idly by, waiting for God's great cleanup of the world, for it was time for each and every one of the faithful, to go out into the world, and to get their own hands dirty.

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Over the past number of months, in the country of Uganda, a bill has come forward in their parliament entitled the "Anti-Homosexuality Bill 2009." Before I share some of the bill's provisions, I think it is drastically important to note, that a number of the Anglican Bishops of Uganda not only *condone* the movement of their parliament in this matter, but have publically endorsed the bills intentions.

Under the Anti-Homosexuality Bill:

- Any person alleged to be homosexual would be at risk of life imprisonment, or in some circumstances the death penalty;
- Any parent who does not denounce their lesbian daughter or gay son to the authorities faces up to three years in prison;
- Any teacher, or minister, who does not report a lesbian or gay pupil, or parishioner, to the authorities within 24 hours of knowledge of said persons, would face up to three years in prison;
- And any landlord or landlady who happens to give housing to suspected homosexual persons would risk seven years of imprisonment.

Similarly, the Bill threatens to punish, or ruin, the reputations of anyone who works with the gay or lesbian population, such as medical doctors, working on HIV/AIDS, civil society leaders active in the fields of sexual and reproductive health, and thus further undermining public health efforts to combat the spread of HIV in Africa.

In the face of a Parliament proposing to enact law legitimizing the round up of a vulnerable societal demographic, and its support by Anglican Bishops in the region, the Archbishop of Canterbury has yet to speak publically, and strongly, against the words of his Bishops in Uganda, and denounce the bill itself. For fear of further destabilizing the Anglican Communion over what has been the volatile standoff over sexuality; Archbishop Williams has remained disturbingly silent, choosing to respond with, as his press secretary referred to as, diplomatic backchannels.

Ironically however, when last week, the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles elected the Reverend Canon Mary Glasspool, the Episcopal Churches first openly lesbian bishop, Lambeth was not hesitant to respond. Within hours of the election of the US Episcopal Churches 2<sup>nd</sup> openly gay Bishop, the PR Machine of the Archbishop of Canterbury appeared to be in full force. The Archbishop publically asked for “restraint” from the United States House of Bishops, who will soon be meeting to confirm Canon Glasspool’s election. Archbishop Williams declared that the affirmation of Glasspool would further strain the bonds of the worldwide Anglican Communion.

And the Archbishop may be correct.

But where is the justice in a church that scolds the election of a faithful and committed woman, offering herself for service in God’s church, and remains silent to a law which would condemn that same woman to death, if she lived in another part of the Communion.

“You brood of vipers” I can just hear John the Baptist cry. “That is not God’s Kingdom you proclaim!”

The Baptist’s cry for transformation, and Jesus’ call for revolution, did not merely ‘call’ the faithful, but ‘required’ them to feed those who were hungry, clothe those who were naked, and to those in positions of

power, *demand*ed that they speak out against injustice, never abusing those who found themselves vulnerable.

John announces that one is coming who will baptize us with much more than water, but with fire and the Holy Spirit. I tell you that one has come who has baptized us with empowerment to live the life God intended us to live, transforming how we treat our neighbours, our world, and ourselves.

The challenge today for every Christian, in every walk of life, and for every congregation, is to demonstrate to an unbelieving world, that *there is* a difference in the Christ's way.

Whether you are in favour, or against, the hot topic issues in the church today; whether you agree with the blessing of same sex marriage, or whether you don't believe its God's will – in the eyes of God there is no black and no white, no gay and no straight, no Jew and no Gentile, no slave and no free.

Our God does not invite us to purify His world through hatred and through destruction, but invites us to join with Him to transform His world through compassion, through love, and through intentional action.

I invite you this morning, to join me, in a campaign to remind our leaders, of their role in the Kingdom which both the Baptist and the Christ proclaimed. Join me in reminding them that as leaders in our church, and in our Communion, they are not just called to *remember* the poor, the suffering and the isolated, but that each and every one of us is required to speak out and to act against injustice in the world – so that the vulnerable will never have to be afraid.

As of tomorrow morning, I invite any of you who feel so moved, to write letters to be sent alongside my own, to our own Bishop's Bob, and Terry, to our Primate Archbishop Fred, and to the Archbishop of Canterbury.

My own letter will ask for their public denunciation of the Ugandan bill, and for political pressure to be asserted to protect the lives of the vulnerable in Uganda.

I do not ask or invite you to write a letter in favour, or opposition, to the hot button issues in the church – for the dignity of human life in Uganda has nothing to do with such debates. Even if you have stood in radical opposition to the progressive issues of the church, I ask you to search your conscience, and ask yourself, whether God's will envisions the rounding up of a group of people, condemning them to death, and punishing their sympathizers.

I invite you to consider God's dream for humanity.

For God's dream envisions more than just tolerance or mere equality. It envisions more than just *thoughts* of charity. An equal you can acknowledge once and then forever thereafter ignore. God's dream wants us to be brothers and sisters in Christ. God's dream wants us to be family.<sup>1</sup>

Our God stands firmly next to our persecuted brothers and sisters in Uganda and all over the world – my brothers and sisters in Christ; let us stand firmly next to God.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> God Has a Dream – Archbishop Desmond Tutu