

This week I put my car in for a service and MOT. These things are always anxiety inducing at the best of times: the wait between dropping the car at the garage and receiving 'the phone call' to tell you what needs to be done. But to add to this I was aware of the fact that the wee amber warning light had appeared on the dashboard a few months ago – telling me something was wrong – but of course, the car was still going, and so I ignored it.

The cost of my ignoring the warning light turned out to be quite significant – fixing the problems early on would have been easy enough, but ignoring the warning light made them far, far worse and far more costly!

Lesson learned!

I wonder if there can be something of this in our Christmas preparations. Many of us, including me, will have our decorations up – trees, twinkly lights, reminders of warmth and comfort in the dark weeks of December. So often our minds are already on the crib – on the Christmas story.

And in the centre of all of this, in bursts John the Baptist. A disturber of our peace. Not preaching a cosy message of comfort and joy. But a difficult message of repentance. Warnings about the wrath to come. Name calling of the religious authorities of the day – the 'brood of vipers'.

And that is our Gospel, our Good news, for this week. Like the warning light on my dashboard perhaps it makes us a little uncomfortable. But if we can, like my car, just keep going for a bit longer, then perhaps it'll all be okay. We'll get to the crib. To the sweet and mild baby Jesus, the obedient virgin, the shepherds and angels and wise men. To the comfort of the incarnation – of God becoming man and in his great and unconditional love coming to save us.

But John gives us a stark warning. A warning that just to keep going on as we are until God comes and fixes it is not okay. Rather than being a time to keep going, to keep pressing on, John's words remind us that advent is a time to pause. To pay attention to the warning lights around us before it is too late.

If the world to which John was preaching had been a perfect place and the lives of God's children been all they were meant to be then there would have been no need for that first Christmas. For Jesus to come to earth.

When we look around our world, watch the news, or think about our own lives we're confronted with the reality of John's sermon today. Things are not as they should be. Our world and our lives are not as they should be, are not all they were created to be. We could each name the sinful or broken places of our lives and world: anger, violence, greed, poverty, homelessness, war, lives controlled by fear, years of guilt that have crippled us. The list could go on and on.

But behind all of this broken-ness is perhaps the worst sin of all. That which allows broken-ness to flourish. Apathy. Indifference. In some ways

indifference and apathy are worst of all sins, of all evils. They're more contagious, and more dangerous. Often, we live such busy, exhausted lives that we have become indifferent to what is happening in the world, indifferent to the needs of another human being. And with all of the busyness and exhaustion of the build up to Christmas it can be all the more tempting to take refuge in preparing for the day – to look forward to the crib and ignore Advent as a season of spiritual preparation for the coming of Jesus.

Apathy and indifference creep into every aspect of mans existence. When John addresses the Pharisees and Sadducees in today's Gospel – telling them to bear fruit worthy of repentance he is challenging them – it is not enough for them to be baptised and then to continue as they were before. Their lives must show that they have turned to God – they can't be indifferent. They are called to bear fruit.

Bearing fruit is not an easy task. Sometimes the pain and fear in our lives causes us to be indifferent to those relationships that need forgiveness and reconciliation. We can become indifferent to ourselves and can fail to see the original beauty with which God created each of us. Indifference can convince us that life is meaningless. Indifference comes in many different forms.

On a bigger scale, at this time of year, we hear the warnings about the climate emergency, yet we can deny the impact our choices make on this and continue with our Christmas quest to buy, buy, buy, consume, consume, consume with no thought to the consequences. We can choose to ignore the warning lights around us – to become indifferent and just continue as we are. All of this can result in our world view becoming so small that if something does not directly affect our lives then it is of no consequence to us.

I don't know about you, but I found it uncomfortable this week when John the Baptist appeared proclaiming the words "*bear fruit worthy of repentance*". His words reminded me that I can't just use Advent to press on with my Christmas preparations, ignoring the warning lights I see and read about every day. His words reminded me powerfully that Advent is a time to take a step back and look at my life and my choices – really look at them and see if they measure up – do I – in every aspect of my life – try to make choices that lead myself and those my choices affect to fullness of life, freedom and flourishing. Or do my choices, even the ones that seem indifferent, negatively impact myself and others – others who I may or may not see.

John's cry of repentance is the call to turn away from our indifference to engage, at a life-changing level, with God's Kingdom and the way that God's Kingdom reorders our relationships and priorities. To us today John's words are words of interrogation. Do we care enough to change our lives and the world in which we live? Do we love enough to get angry about the

suffering and plight of other human beings – even if we've never met them? Do we recognise and honour the dignity of ourselves and others as created and beloved children of God? Do we try to make a difference? A positive difference in every action and choice we make. Or are there areas where we just sit back and allow indifference to take root?

To follow Jesus is to reject indifference. To not be prepared to settle for this world being less than it was created to be. Advent is not about asking ourselves if our practical preparations for Christmas are complete. But about asking where do we fail to bear fruit? Where does the indifference that denies us and others the Kingdom of Heaven rule our lives?

To pay attention to the warning lights, to name the places and ways of our indifference is the beginning of repentance and the Kingdom of Heaven coming just that little bit nearer than it was before.

**Amen**