

“Whoa, dude!” – Luke 3:15-17,21-22

There have been some beautiful “shut-down moments” in film, and one of my favourites is the scene from Indiana Jones: Raiders of the Lost Ark. You may recall the scene where one of the Arab bad guys comes at Indy waving a wicked pair of curved swords. We all expect Indy to be in serious trouble, but he pulls out a revolver and simply shoots the bad guy. Now, I’m certainly not advocating violence, but that scene is one of those perfect moments when an expected nasty outcome gets shut down unexpectedly, and very decisively.

The scene in our reading from Luke’s gospel this morning is another perfect shut-down moment, although this time without any violence. John – the Baptist or Baptiser, if you prefer – comes out swinging, albeit on Jesus’ behalf. He not only asserts that Jesus is so much worthier than he himself is, but also carries on to proclaim that the Messiah to come will be way more effective than him, laying waste with his holy winnowing stick, gathering in the wheat and burning the chaff. And then, boom! Comes the shut-down moment, with Jesus’ own baptism, and an affirmation of his Messiahship.

To help us understand both why this is a shut-down moment and the importance of this incident let’s take a look at where this incident fits both within Jesus’ life and ministry but also equally importantly in Luke’s account of those goings-on.

To begin, understand that John was a prophet. A good old-fashioned, put-the-word-of-God-in-your-face (if not right up your nose) kind of prophet. John was a prophet’s prophet, a classic iconic Old Testament figure calling the woefully sinful people to repentance, and to be baptized as a sign of being cleansed through that repentance. Camel-hair coating instead of sugar-coating was John’s style – rough, abrasive, invoking a dreaded fear of the almighty and the punishments and doom that would result from faltering faith. Granted, as we saw a few weeks ago, the content of his message was pretty orthodox and not that different from Jesus’ later message – clothe the naked and feed the hungry, or as he put it, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” To tax collectors he gave the advice to be honest, and to soldiers he cautioned against extortion. All good, basic admonitions to do justice. But John’s style was classic, over-the-top railing against the “brood of vipers” who surrounded him seeking to be baptized.

Now we can’t ever be certain as to whether John was basically a grumpy kind of guy or whether he started off gentle enough but became somewhat jaded by the swarms of people exercising a kind of “consumerist” faith – you know the kind: “hey, one quick baptism and poof! you’re good for life!” In any event, his attitude seems to have clouded his understanding of the Messiah who would follow him. He seems, according to Luke at least, to have been completely aware that he himself was not the Messiah, no matter how badly throngs of people wanted to believe that he was. In response to their wondering in their hearts if he was the Messiah, John addressed their questioning with a direct, if somewhat vague, answer. He refers to “one who is more powerful than I is coming” but makes no declaration that Jesus is the one to whom he refers. In fact, we even have in the gospels an account of John in prison sending his disciples to ask of Jesus whether he is the Messiah. But John is in no doubt that he himself is not the Messiah, because the Messiah yet to come will be even nastier, wielding a winnowing stick, sorting people like wheat and chaff and consigning the losers to the fire. Whew! A strong image, even stronger when you know what a winnowing stick is. It’s a long pole, with a shorter, heavier club attached at the end by a rope or chain (a bit like those “numchuck” sticks – I think that’s what they’re called – used by martial arts types). Grain is piled not too deeply in a stone or wooden basin, and the winnowing stick is used to beat the cr_p out of it, knocking the hulls loose

from the grain kernels. The battered mix is then tossed into the air where the passing wind (Bible students should recognize the Hebrew parallel here between breath/wind/spirit!) blows the lighter chaff to one side but the heavier, more solid kernels fall back into the gathering cloth. The chaff is off course useless except to use as a quick fuel to boil tea, and so that is the fate to which it is consigned. So, according to John, the Messiah to come is a rough figure who will beat the living daylights out of people, use the Holy Wind or Spirit to separate the good from the bad and ugly, and will throw those with whom he is displeased into the fire. What an image!

And then, as Luke tells us, the grace of God intervenes with a perfect “Whoa, dude!” moment. Just then, the unrecognized Messiah Jesus is himself baptized, and God’s affirmation of being pleased with this gentler Son is verbalized. The Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus, not some debris-filled winnowing wind like a hurricane or tornado but settling gently like a dove. Talk about a shut-down moment! This was a complete reversal of the doom and gloom picture of a Messiah brought to you by John, replaced by a kind, considerate Son of God proclaiming a new reconciliation with God, a new covenant sealed not in the blood of the hapless but in his own blood. In this moment we hear Jesus being affirmed by God as the true Messiah, and in the months and few short years to follow we will hear of his healing and redemptive power. Yes, there will be moments of passion and disruption, particularly against those who would turn the house of God into a place of commerce, but the story that unfolds from this moment is one of calling to, not driving away; a story of divine compassion, of healing and reconciliation.

Sadly, not all who call themselves followers of the true Messiah, Jesus the Christ, heard that John’s message was replaced by Jesus’. Too many today still long for and proclaim the return of a Messiah who will focus upon separating the people into the good (that would be them, of course) and the bad (that would be all the others, naturally!) through a purging by bludgeoning and fire. Much of it is done with a smarmy overlay of “Jesus loves you” but at the heart the message is still clearly one of an angry God bent on vengeance sending a Holy Emissary to slay any who haven’t “toed the line” correctly enough – a perspective very much like John’s, and so very different from the Messiah with whom his Father was so very pleased.

However, even though it seems at times like the “uptight, upright” are winning the day through drowning out the message of grace, nevertheless the quiet impetus of the grace of God still shines forth. The message proclaimed by the one affirmed by God as the Messiah still rings out into a beat-down world: “come unto me all you who are weary, and I shall give you rest.” The familiar words of the gentle, reconciling true Messiah are still echoed by those with ears to hear the shift from winnowing sticks and fire to an outstretched hand, words of comfort: “go in peace, your faith has made you well.” A world longing for comfort and compassion is able to set aside the dire predictions of judging and separation and still hold dear the words of promise, “I will send you the comforter, the Holy Spirit, who will guide you into all truth” and “lo, I am with you until the end of the age.”

That’s the grace of God made so clear in that wondrous “whoa, dude!” moment of Jesus’ baptism, where the gentle but all-powerful status of Jesus was set so clearly against the ranting and railing of John; where the all-encompassing love of God was made clear in Jesus, Emmanuel – God with us. This year because of the vagaries of the lunar calendar set against our solar calendar we will rush headlong from Christmas into Lent and Easter, and that is appropriate as we see this almost instant transition from the old covenant into the new. There is little time to dwell on Jesus as an infant; there is even less time to hold on to a view of the Messiah as an instrument of God’s wrath. The time is now to hear the affirmation of Jesus as the legitimate Son of God, and to hear his message of a new life, an abundant life, an eternal life.