

## Sermon Advent 3 Year C 2024

If you've ever felt the world around you is getting stupider, it is because in fact it is! Research has now revealed that in developed western countries average IQ scores are decreasing. From the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when such records started to be taken, on average populations were adding three IQ points per decade. Decline has been noted since 1975. Now it is as much as 7 IQ points per generation that is being lost.

Some have proposed that our tech obsession might be to blame, but as the decline started in the 1970s, well before everyone spent their days staring at screens, that can't be the whole story. Other proposed explanations are unhealthy modern diets, increasingly trashy media, or a decline in the quality of schooling or the prevalence of reading. At the moment, the cause of the decline remains a mystery. Whatever it turns out to be, however, we should all probably start worrying about what our sedentary, screen addicted, junk-food-munching lifestyles might be doing to our brains.

Now, one response to this trend might be that we simply lower our expectations. I am sure you are all familiar with the phenomena of educational institutions - from primary to tertiary – never failing anyone. Questions on standardised tests and exams have become easier. Calculators, computers and now increasing AI technology have taken over so many tasks – even simple tasks - that once we had personally wrestle with.

Not wanting to pass judgment on the recent US president candidates, but in previous presidential races, candidates would quote poetry, Cicero and offer lessons from the Roman Republic. In 1968 Robert Kennedy, brother of the more famous Jack Kennedy (JFK) put his hat in the ring to become democrat presidential candidate. At a Presidential campaign rally in Indiana, Bobby Kennedy received word of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr and he was forced to spontaneously respond.

Despite the charged atmosphere of having to break the tragic news to the crowd he went on to deliver a short but powerful address. Completely improvised, he said, *My favourite poet was Aeschylus. He wrote: "In our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God."* It is hard to think of any political figure anywhere today managing to quote Aeschylus by memory and without preparation!

At the end of the same improvised address, Bobby Kennedy said, *Let us dedicate ourselves to what the Greeks wrote so many years ago: to tame the savageness of man and make gentle the life of this world.* How remarkable that in an emotionally fraught situation, one man at least could speak with such clarity and depth. Some natural talent was surely at work in him. But his ability surely also the result of high expectations. What's more Kennedy also thought highly of his audience. He addressed them as mature, reasonable, intelligent citizens. He didn't dumb down to them either.

Unfortunately, large parts of the church have played into the idea that the best response to the culture is to mirror it. It has resulted in a widespread culture not just of compromise, but of dumbing down. It has been just about the most idiotic mission strategy the church has ever adopted! And with devastating results. The saying rings true: *Insanity is doing the same thing over and over while expecting different results.* And we have lived now for decades with a church which has said, *if we just change this, if we just drop that, if just compromise here and accommodate there, then the people will come flocking. We will revitalise the church. We will attract others to join us.* But of course, the reverse has proved true. We simply become more irrelevant. And yet it is the policy so many continue to insist on. And it is a form of madness.

In one of the latest iterations of this, the diocese of Perth this past October elected to remove the terms 'chastity in singleness and faithfulness in marriage' from the Faithfulness in Service requirements for ministry. This is the document all clergy and all those in ministry sign up to across the country. The diocese (including the Archbishop) argued that the change is to be more inclusive and that there should be faithfulness and integrity in all relationships. But let's not be fooled by the language. Until five minutes ago the church understood 'faithfulness and integrity in relationships' to be contained in marriage. Remove marriage from the equation, well what is the standard for faithfulness? In short, there is none. Another example of compromise. Another example of the church attempting to be relevant. Another example of lowering expectations and of dumbing down the faith. But no one will join the church because of this position. And plenty others will simply recognise this as another nail in the coffin.

On this third Sunday of Advent, the church once more places before us the challenging and disturbing figure of John the Baptist. It would be fair to say that with John there is no dumbing down. He places high expectations on the crowd who come to hear him.

Our reading takes place on the banks of the Jordan River and the crowd ask John, *What must we do?* But that in response to John saying to the crowd, *'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance... And then, 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.'*

Now, this is a challenging word. John is not going soft here. There is no 'dumbing down' of his message. No compromise or easy accommodation. It is a hard message. But the remarkable thing is that *the people want to hear this message*. They are hungry for something. They want to hear what he has to say. And he turns around and calls them a brood of vipers! Which says something about the quality of John's character. He is not trying to cosy up to the crowd. He is not trying to make things easy for them or sell them some cheap, easy solution. It would be a rare context where such a sweeping insult was greeted so positively. If at the start of each Sunday sermon I started calling you all *lousy, miserable sinners, you hopeless, inept, pathetic creatures!* I imagine the wardens might take me aside and have a hard word with me! But John can get away with it. There's something about John which means the crowd can look past the blazing insults to the message that lay beyond, to the message that comes from the place of his deep authenticity. And from that deep place of authenticity John can challenge the crowd to something more, something better. He can argue that fruits of their repentance will be seen in concrete, practical ways.

John, of course, anticipates Jesus' own ministry. This is why he is called the 'forerunner', the one who prepares the way. Oftentimes in the church we think that the gospel – the good news of God in Jesus Christ - can be reduced (dumbed down even) to something like God is all forgiving. He loves everybody. He loves you. And we're all ok. Which is true, but only in part. The other part is that Jesus knows that we can be something other – indeed something better – than we already are. And this is attractive! People actually don't just want to hear words of reassurance but also words of challenge. The gospel is not just that we are loved and accepted. We are loved and accepted in order that we might be changed. And both of these things: love *and* change; acceptance *and* challenge is what makes the good news truly good. As faithful disciples of the Lord Jesus, we should not step back from proclaiming in season and out of season, the full message of Jesus Christ. It is only the fullness of faith that will be attractive. It will only be the fullness of the gospel that will feed hungry souls. Amen.