

St John the Baptist, ADVENT 3, 17th December 2023

Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance” – is not how the preacher usually starts a sermon in this church! But any sermon that dares to seek to be true to the inheritance of John the Baptist has to include elements of challenge to us all.

John’s call to repent, to turn our lives around, is needed in every generation of organised religion – the scribes and pharisees of Matthew 23 had no monopoly on hypocrisy, then or now.

John’s call is laden with warnings of wrath, of fire, of judgment, dire warnings of an axe at our roots if we do not bear fruit – warnings that the Church in this age especially needs, if we are not to suffer the same fate as the Sycamore two months ago.

His voice cries in our modern moral wilderness, now as then, “prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight” – in Handel’s Messiah, the recitative which sets these words falls strikingly after the comfort of the opening E major aria. How are we to prepare?

Fortunately, John is rather down-to-earth about our preparation: when asked for help and advice, he calls on the crowds to share what they have; calls on those in authority to not burden the poor, and not complain about their own lot! His pragmatic expounding of ordinary, common-or-garden holiness and righteousness of life, reminds me of a man choosing a mosque in Iraq, asking each preacher the price of a tin of tomatoes, eventually selecting the Shia cleric Muqtada al Sadr, because he was the only one practical enough to know! Perhaps every ministry training course should ask the same – I know they never asked me anything so sensible... Righteousness is not rocket science, but proportionate to the station and state in life where each of us finds ourselves set. True repentance includes self-examination, and consideration of our context, not for excuses for our bad behaviour, but to identify risks along our road, and opportunities to serve.

So, when we have repented and reflected, where might John the Baptist point us next, this Advent? He, like us, is seeking Christ, seeing through a glass darkly, struggling to recognise Him for whom he is hoping and longing, with all the fallen world. John is looking, in fact, for signs of the Spirit, - “till He become the place wherein the Holy Spirit makes His dwelling”. John does not quite know what he is looking for, but knows the warmth of recognition when he finds it. He has much to teach us about the ongoing quest for Christ, with Christ, in each of our lives –

Bishop Lancelot Andrewes compared this to Mary Magdalene on Easter morning – asking Christ to help her find Christ, needing His help in revelation. The greatest silence I ever found from Senior Cadet NCOs was when I said “I come not to bring Christ to you, but to find Christ among you”. He reveals Himself to us surprisingly, always ahead of us, and in John the Forerunner we have perhaps our best other help on the road, for he has awaited and sought Him too.

So, when we have repented, turned our lives around, laid a foundation of ordinary plain goodness, and are on our lifelong quest for Christ, where does John take us?

John is clothed with humility – describes himself as unworthy to carry Christ’s sandals. He looks to Christ in *all* things – “he must increase, and I must decrease”. I feel for John as, like myself, his joy is to ever seek a better minister than himself – not always a comfortable quest!

Perhaps John’s greatest surprise is his description of himself as a “friend of the bridegroom”. Anyone who has seen friends of bridegrooms about on Osborne Road on a weekend might not immediately think of John the Baptist! But in his own heart, mind and self-image, he is looking for joy, seeking to rejoice, to party – observers complained that John’s students fasted while Christ’s feasted, but John is the Advent fast-er before the Christmas party, ever looking forward to the joy of the Lamb of God. John is an fascinating mix of humility and wrath, passion and joy – a person, in fact, in love.

He is, of course, Christ’s cousin: + yet, that is the least thing about him: his final actions, like Christ’s fall silent, when he is murdered for his call to plain right living, by a politician too weak to oppose others’ call for John’s silencing; and Christ’s challenging words, in John’s memory, are that the least person in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than he – perhaps John always stands on the threshold.

Let me leave the last word to John’s father, Zechariah:

“And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest:

For thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways;

to give knowledge of salvation unto His people

By the remission of their sins; Through the tender mercy of our God;

Whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us,

To give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,

To guide our feet into the way of peace.”

In memory of John the Baptist, to the joy and glory of the coming Christ, and in the Name of Almighty God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

AMEN.