

Sermon on 3rd Sunday in Advent at St Peter & St Paul, 11th December 2011
By Revd James Shakespeare

Lord, for whom we watch and wait, as Christmas draws nearer, draw our hearts to your love and help us (with John the Baptist) to 'prepare the way' for your kingdom. Amen

I often wonder, in my more reflective moments, what it is that will finally draw people back to God & his Way today. What is it that will speak into our moral confusion & cultural anxiety, and reignite people's energy & passion for the things of God? What is it that will free us from selfishness & blindness to the needs of others, and help restore the practise of love & compassion & community - where the needs of the suffering & downtrodden are taken with as much seriousness as our own hopes for comfort and material prosperity? Where, in the words of our Old Testament prophet, the Lord will bring:

*"Good news to the oppressed
Bind up the broken-hearted
Proclaim liberty to captives...
Comfort for those who mourn"*

In other words when we will all realise, secure in our faith, that our own wellbeing (as human beings) is inescapably bound up with the needs of our neighbours... for the two belong together.

I say this reflecting on the yearning we find in scripture (especially in the prophets, but also in the Gospels) for a world in which right relationships – with God and with our neighbours – are restored, and in which (in the words of Isaiah) we are clothed with the garments of salvation, "the Lord [making] righteousness and praise to spring up before... the nations."

And as I ask this question, I keep coming back to the conviction that the nearest I will ever get to an answer is John the Baptist, the voice of one crying out in the wilderness.

There is something tantalising and deeply attractive about the ministry of John the Baptist, and yet almost impossible to understand from our contemporary- individualistic & comfort-driven mode of existence. Why was it that people were drawn, literally in their 100s & even their 1,000s, from Jerusalem and the surrounding villages to meet this ascetic preacher, out in the wilderness? What was it about him and their deep-seated (perhaps barely recognised) longing that drew them to him? And what was it about his message that finally drew them back to God, to radical repentance and joyful anticipation of the coming of a Messiah, who would (in word & deed & acts of power) bring in God's Kingdom.

Perhaps things had to get really bad – as they seem to have in our world today, if our news stories are anything to go by – before people were ready to trust that things could really be different. Then, as now, the signs were not good. The rise and fall of empires, endless wars & violence, an increasingly vocal (in their case) rural proletariat, a corrupt leadership (in many places) & little hope for commonly yearned for freedom. As the poet W B Yeats wrote, after the 1st world war, capturing so well the spirit of our times, not much different (at heart) to then:

*"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;*

*The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity."*

And yet part of John the Baptist's genius was that he didn't deny the reality of the state people were in, but – from the depths of his own spiritual wisdom & the prophetic tradition– was given a way of helping people to face the darkness, in order to rediscover the light. In other words John, in preaching a baptism of repentance and forgiveness, with great moral authority and authenticity, led people to leave behind their old life and turn again towards God. And it was only in acknowledging their wretchedness (to use the language of the Prayer Book) and going out into the wilderness to face themselves, that people discovered the freedom to know forgiveness and a joyful new life, in God. A new life, not just for themselves, but for the whole of society, as they returned to whatever context they found themselves in, in the world...

So what do we find about John the Baptist's ministry that can challenge and draw us today, and indeed that we need to model ourselves, as we seek to witness hope to a world in so much confusion and need?

There's a curious contrast between what we hear about John the Baptist in today's Gospel, and what Mark's Gospel, says about him. In Mark we learn more about John the Baptist's lifestyle: and he certainly didn't fit the mode of today's celebrity – dressed, as he was, in camel's hair & living off locusts and wild honey. Neither did he appear to belong to any kind of power structure or interest group. He was simply called by God, & indeed propelled from a young age, to go out into the wilderness and preach a baptism of repentance, in preparation for Jesus; enacting, in his own life (as true prophets always do), the radical message of hope and of a fresh start.

What both Gospel accounts share is the conviction that John the Baptist was the long-awaited 'voice of one crying out in the wilderness', 'prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.' The forerunner, whose role it was to make people ready – something close to the heart of the message of Advent. Like those today, perhaps, who go beyond the normal structures of society (out into the wilderness, whether as campaigners or poets, monks or teachers) in order to point to a way that will draw us back to God and his kingdom today.

And then, in today's Gospel, we discover a final clue that John the Baptist is (at heart) simply called to be a witness: pointing not to himself, his own importance or stature, but to Christ: the one coming after him. Indeed John's whole purpose seems to be this: to point away from himself and towards Christ. "In all humility, to recognise" as one writer puts it, "that he is not the centre but the periphery; not the attraction but the signpost; not the light, but the one who helps others see the Light." A challenge to our inherently self-centred society, to remember where true Christian witness & real freedom (something the world will never see) lies: in pointing not to ourselves or to our own importance, but to Christ. For here, again, is a clue as to how people (in the end) are drawn back to God – not through ourselves, our words or wisdom, but through His light transparent in us, pointing people (beyond ourselves) to Him, "The true light, which enlightens everyone" which "is coming into the world."

John the Baptist was one of those rare people who really did begin to draw people back to God, and the world back from the brink – preparing their hearts for the coming of Jesus. The question is, how might God raise up such people today, and are we willing to repent and to share in this exciting ministry? Making ourselves ready to respond to Jesus. For in the end, John the Baptist points us, surprisingly, to where true life is to be found and joy to be embraced:

- ❖ Not ultimately, in insatiable concern for ourselves, but in pointing to Christ, who alone brings life.
- ❖ Not continuing with our former life, or making do with the sad story of our times, but via repentance, choosing a much better life and surer foundation.
- ❖ & in (finally) seeking to live more simply and serve the needs of others (in very practical ways, as good neighbours), to put words into action, and discover the transforming joy of discipleship.

And so I invite you, this Advent, at this mid-way point, Gaudete Sunday (a day to rejoice, because the Lord is near), to choose life, and look again at John the Baptist, and how he might speak – both to you & to the urgent needs of our time, for the things of God.

For Christ indeed is coming soon, to usher in God's kingdom, and we need (with John the Baptist & those drawn to him) to be ready & waiting... ready to respond and share (with him) in the task of proclamation: to be, today, the voice of ones crying out in our wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. For the way back to God is not, in the end, an impossible hope, but a ever ready challenge, to find a way through darkness into light, through repentance and forgiveness into grace-filled living, and through loving, into courageous joy. For Christ is coming soon, His life is freely offered, and yet we need to learn how to respond, to make ready our hearts, so that when he comes, he may find a dwelling place for himself. *Amen*