



Revd Ro's Reflection on 2nd Sunday of Advent

Year A

Romans 15.4-13

Matthew 3.1-12

This Sunday, Advent 2, we light the second of our Advent candles. The candles represent hope in the darkness. With the Second Advent candle we remember the prophets. The Old Testament prophets were people like Amos, Ezekiel, Micah, Zephaniah, Zechariah, Malachi, Jeremiah and of course Isaiah. They were commissioned to represent the goodness of God, to speak God's message in a troubled world. But it was a dangerous thing to do. We have seen how Jesus refers to the ways the prophets were often treated, 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!' (Luke 13.34), and again in some of his parables, like the parable of the vineyard (Matthew 21.33).

Prophets were called by God to deliver his message to Kings, leaders and the people. They were commissioned to warn and to tell them to keep God's teachings. If the people strayed from God and broke their covenant with him there would be consequences. So often a prophet's fate was to be ignored, 'O foolish and senseless people, who have eyes but do not see who have ears, but do not hear,' (Jeremiah 5.21). Sometimes, as Jesus said, it was downright dangerous to be a prophet. Prophets were there to tell God's truth and that was generally not what kings wanted to hear. They wanted to go their own way and they did not want to be told they were wrong. If someone did stand up to them then that person was likely to be ignored or punished. Jeremiah found that out when he was thrown into a well and left to die.

'The king said to Jeremiah, 'I have something to ask you; do not hide anything from me.'¹⁵ Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, 'If I tell you, you will put me to death, will you not? And if I give you advice, you will not listen to me.'¹⁶ So King Zedekiah swore an oath in secret to Jeremiah, 'As the Lord lives, who gave us our lives, I will not put you to death or hand you over to these men who seek your life.' (Jeremiah 38).

Zedekiah was a puppet King left by Nebuchadnezzar to govern the Jews. Of course the prophet has something of great importance to tell the king. He must trust in God and listen to advice. 'Then

Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, 'Thus says the Lord, the God of hosts, the God of Israel, If you will only surrender to the officials of the king of Babylon, then your life shall be spared, and this city shall not be burned with fire, and you and your house shall live.' Of course Jeremiah was ignored and Jerusalem was overrun by the forces of Babylon and this time the Temple was destroyed and much of the population of the land taken into exile. This was the great catastrophe in Israel's history. Once again as with their time in Egypt they were captives. Prophets were uncomfortable people; John the Baptist was of course the last in the line of the great biblical prophets and his story begins in our gospel reading.

Those people who stand up for right, who challenge authority, and who metaphorically stick their head above the parapet and confront those with power risk a great deal. People do not like to be challenged. But these were men who braved all the dangers to teach the people and rulers God's way and when the people turned away from God they were prepared to confront them at whatever personal cost. Just think of the great people in our own day and throughout history who have been prepared to put themselves at risk and to stand up against what is wrong and to challenge authority and speak out for what is right, whatever the cost. I am thinking of course of people like Martin Luther King Jr. whose dream of fairness and equality ultimately led to his murder. The list is endless and we see it now in all those who dare to stand up to evil or totalitarianism.

Matthew in today's gospel reading quotes verses from Isaiah as being a specific reference to John who is the herald of Jesus, God's Son. Matthew begins with these words,

^{3.1} 'In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea,'

John is proclaiming in the wilderness of Judea. So Matthew is quite specific when he states,

³ This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight." '

In Isaiah it actually says

³ 'A voice cries out:

'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,

make straight in the desert a highway for our God.' (Isaiah 40)

Isaiah isn't actually saying that the person who is proclaiming actually has to be in the physical wilderness. Actually it's more that Israel has wandered far from God and their hearts have become a barren wilderness. What needs to happen is that the weeds have to be cleared away. The people must repent and their hearts must be prepared to receive the Messiah.

Think of it this way, if we knew an important person was coming we would make sure the house was not just tidy but cleaned from top to bottom. Our house is OK but with a Cavalier King Charles Spaniel with four mucky paws it's a never ending job. For an important visit we'd make sure everything was spick and span. It is the same here, the King is coming, and the Messiah of David's line, lives have to be sorted out, cleansed for him. John is the harbinger of the greatest of tidings. It's time then for the people who have strayed from God's way to repent and be ready for his coming.

Matthew's gospel begins with,

'An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.'

Whereas in Luke ch 1 we have the full story of John the Baptist with the angel foretelling the birth of the special child.

¹² 'When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³ But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. ¹⁴ You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶ He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.'

It continues with the visit of the angel to Mary and then the meeting between the two women. In Matthew we do not hear of John until he emerges in the wilderness to fulfil the angel's prophecy as told in Luke. So here he stands, of an age with Jesus, and a very formidable figure he is, a man who lives in the wilderness and is as tough and uncompromising as his surroundings.

⁴ 'Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.'

When I was a small child John scared me, I referred to him as 'that hairy man.' He was a scary figure. He hadn't time to suffer fools gladly. He was on a mission, the greatest mission in history. He was the harbinger of the King. His was the task of preparing the way for the Messiah. The Messiah who was Israel's true King but also King of the world and the cosmos. Certainly John's appearance and proclamation caused a stir. ² 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' Many of the people realised their shortcomings and heard the call and they responded in droves. He is quite clearly seen as a prophet with authority from God.

⁵ 'Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶ and they were baptised by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.'

The ordinary people are not the only ones who come to him. The leaders of the people come too. But John knows about them. Yes John is offering baptism for the forgiveness of sins to those people who truly repent. But you have to be sincerely sorry and intend to turn your life around. To repent literally means to turn. It is not some kind of ritual John is offering. John is working in God's name and with God's authority. So when these corrupt people who have absolutely no intention of changing their ways come to him he sees straight through them and they get short shrift.

⁷ 'But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹ Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.'

He sums them up by calling them a load of snakes, poisonous and the enemies of the people. Having Abraham for their ancestor, being true Jews is not what it is all about. They have to be worthy, people who live in God's way. They have to stop their corruption, stop abusing their power, stop living for themselves and laying intolerable burdens on the people. They are hypocrites. He has a dire warning for them and all the people.

¹⁰ '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.'

Jesus is the Messiah, he is the one who is the true King, and he will come to bring justice. That is the warning. The day will come when they and all of us will have to answer for our actions, so now is the time for people to straighten out their lives. Now is the time to be sorry for sin and to put on God's

way, Jesus' way. The Pharisees and Sadducees think they have it right with God, anything but, says John! Jesus has this to say in Luke 18.

⁹ 'He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ¹⁰ 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector.'

It is the tax collector who humbly repents; the Pharisee just blows his own trumpet, 'all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.'

Well that is John's meaning but load of snakes is more like him! John gives his central message, ¹¹ 'I baptise you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

John knows he is not important except that he brings news of God's Messiah. He isn't worthy to untie his shoes. Oh that we could learn true humility, the humility of John, the last of the prophets and of Jesus himself who washed the feet of twelve poor men. Sadly once given power it often goes to people's heads like strong drink. This is what John means when he addresses the religious leaders. To quote Shakespeare,

'But man, proud man,
Drest in a little brief authority,
Most ignorant of what he's most assur'd;
His glassy essence, like an angry ape,
Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven,
As make the angels weep.'

No wonder John addressed them with such anger. He is preparing the way for God's Anointed One and when he sees Jesus he will recognise him as such. Here at the beginning of Matthew's gospel we have the contrast between human, 'I will baptise with water' and divine he will baptise with the Holy Spirit. At a baptism we call down the power of the Holy Spirit and the water is consecrated. The Spirit is present. Jesus is the one with divine authority. He is God's Son the Anointed Messiah. It is he who baptises with the Spirit of God. John emphasises that the Messiah is the great King who will judge the earth, he will metaphorically separate the wheat from the chaff. He will sift our sins and it is time to say sorry and to turn to meet our God and King.

St John's gospel begins with the wonderful account of Christ as God incarnate. John the Baptist is put at the very centre, that's the measure of his importance.

⁶ 'There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.'

John the Baptist is only important in that he testifies to the true light whose message will enlighten everyone. Those who turn to Jesus in faith will become children of God and co-heirs with Christ.

I am going to concentrate on St. Paul's epistle to the Romans, but it is useful to read Isaiah 11.1-10 our Old Testament reading. Paul, a Pharisee by education, has the scriptures at his fingertips and he refers to them continually in his writing. He does so in our passage for today. The first part of the reading is set for Bible Sunday and we can see why.

⁴ 'For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.'

The scriptures that Paul is referring to are of course the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament. The Old Testament is the root of our faith. If you think of someone weaving a fabric they will use myriad strands of yarn. Eventually the pattern of the weave becomes miraculously clear. Paul is taking strands from all over the scriptures not just to illustrate his point but to prove it. To show how The Old Testament writers spoke of the Messiah.

Let's just go back to the beginning of the chapter though,

^{15.1} 'We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.

² Each of us must please our neighbour for the good purpose of building up the neighbour. ³ For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, 'The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.'

Paul is speaking to new Christians living in a pagan world, a pagan city Rome is the heart of the Empire, Caesar considers himself to be a god, and woe betides anyone who questioned it. All must confess Caesar as lord. Well there is only one Lord and it is Jesus. There is only one God, the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus is the incarnate God. Christians bow down only before him as Lord.

Paul's advice to these new Christians is to learn to live with one another, and indeed all in their city, in harmony. It is good advice, remember to think of others and don't please yourself. Selfishness is all about the individual; they are part of a community. It must be one with caring at the heart. Jesus is the epitome of love and obedience. He did not please himself but walked in God's way in obedience to him. In the garden he said, 'Nevertheless not my will but yours be done.' Think of Paul's words in Philippians 2

'And being found in human form,

⁸ he humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death—

even death on a cross'.

Jesus is to be the example in everything. They must remember to think of one another before themselves.

⁵ 'May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, ⁶so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.'

I think the 'one voice' is beautiful. This does not mean that people cannot have their own way to worship God; diversity is important; we see that in all the denominations. But we worship the triune God with one voice in that he is the centre. It is the scriptures that guide us and of course Jesus Christ himself. Paul puts Jesus at the centre. John the Baptist did that; Christ was the one who brought God's truth as Messiah and King. Jesus is not just King of the Jews he is King of the whole world. Paul is taking the message to the Gentiles and he shows how scripture foretold that this would be so.

⁷ 'Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. ⁸For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, ⁹ and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.'

There was so much argument amongst the Jews in the early days about Gentile converts to Christianity. That's fine but they must conform to Jewish ways and laws though. Well that is not how it is. There is no longer them and us, there are the people of Christ, Jew and Gentile, equally loved before God. The old barriers of race, status, gender whatever, are washed away in Christ. We are all God's children.

The scriptures were quite clear about the Gentiles writes Paul and he quotes from them, the last quotation being from the reading from Isaiah we have today.

'As it is written,

'Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles,
and sing praises to your name';

¹⁰ and again he says,

'Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people';

¹¹ and again,

'Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,
and let all the peoples praise him';

¹² and again Isaiah says,

'The root of Jesse shall come,
the one who rises to rule the Gentiles;

in him the Gentiles shall hope.'

Paul is writing to a Gentile audience, how easy it would have been to feel like second class citizens. Well that is rubbish, says Paul. It is written of old. The Messiah is not just son of David, son of Jesse, he is God's Son, King of the Gentiles and the Jews; God is the ruler of the whole cosmos. The Gentiles who turn to Christ have their roots in the scriptures. Paul shows absolute faith in these new Christians when he says,

¹³ 'May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.'

God is three in one, the Father, the Son Jesus, and the Holy Spirit who came down upon his followers at Pentecost and who strengthens each one of us with power from on high. Remember says Paul, however tough it is, you are children of God, equal and loved, Jesus is your King, and you have the Spirit within you, knowing that you will go from strength to strength. So Paul is able to say,

¹⁴ 'I myself feel confident about you, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another.'

Here they stand then, two giants of the New Testament, both with the mission to tell of the King Jesus. John the Baptist the harbinger of the greatest news ever told; the one who prepares the way of the Lord, and Paul who after Jesus' death met him on the road to Damascus and devoted his life to his God given mission.

Throughout our lives we try to bring ourselves into line with the way of Jesus. In Advent as in Lent this is brought into a sharper focus. Now we examine our lives in preparation for the celebration of the coming of our King at Christmas but also his second coming.

On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry announces that the Lord is nigh, awake and harken for he brings glad tidings of the King of Kings. Charles Coffin

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