

Address for 12 December, 3rd Sunday in Advent, by Louise Tulloh

We welcome Louise as our preacher today. Louise is on placement with us as part of her training for ordination with the South West Ministry Training Course. She works in our parish as a doctor at the University Medical Centre.

Advent, from the Latin 'adventus', which means 'coming'. The appearance of God as flesh.

Advent...

A time to read, pray, reflect and to be expectant but also be prepared to receive.

A time to prepare in our hearts a sense of Holy anticipation, as we eagerly await the celebration of Christ's birth and the promise of his second coming.

A time to reflect on the joy we have access to because of our faith in Jesus. To take the focus off the hustle and bustle of the season and also the sadness which can be felt at this time of year if we have lost loved ones- relatives, friends, or pets... and find peace in Jesus- a peace like no other- a deep internal, all encompassing, Holy peace, as we focus our thoughts on the gift that God has given us, in his Son who came from Heaven to Earth.

As we cross ourselves.... Father – came down to earth as his Son, with the power of the Holy Spirit.

Themes

1. Joy (+ pink candle)
2. The coming of Christ and Baptism
3. Bearing fruits

In the Gospel reading from Luke, we heard how John the Baptist brought the people Joyful news of salvation, along with a very honest assessment of their sins.... He is not a man to mince his words. In the medical world, giving feedback is a very sensitive, gentle affair- pointing out what someone is doing well.... Then how they could possibly consider.... Or have they thought of....

Not with John. The gloves are off and he's straight to the point.

'You brood of Vipers'.

He declares that the promises of the OT prophets will be fulfilled- God's chosen one who all of Israel has been waiting for, is on the way.... 'one who is more powerful than I is coming... he will baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire'. Fire- both terrifying and refining. This fire frees us from the grip of sin but involves a painful process of purification. No pain. No gain.

John also came with warnings- The assumption that race/ nation would guarantee their salvation, without repentance- 'oh no' says John.

What John was saying was radical. Being Jewish is not enough. Just because you have Abraham don't think you have it made. You must turn from sin and live the right kind of life.

So.... In John the Baptist style.... You brood of Vipers.... Are we guilty of this too ? Do we think that because we believe in Jesus and come to Church that we are in through the door and don't need to do anything else...? We are called to live lives which honour and glorify God, lives which seek to serve God, and this helps bring us purpose, we discover why we were created. I meet so many patients who are looking for 'something more' – a purpose, a sense of fulfilment, they ask 'what's the point', 'why am I here'? We are intrinsically programmed to be seekers- however this will not be found by taking up yoga or going veganthe answer is God's revelation to us in Jesus.

John came with challenges too – repent and be baptised-

Baptism- for 1st century Jews, was a ritual cleansing. You were now clean before God. Your sinful nature had been washed away and you were a new person.

The Baptism liturgy links to the passion and resurrection of Christ and connects to the theme of redemption. We share in Christ's death- we die to selfishness, individualism, addiction, self-focus and rise to self- giving, sacrifices, fresh starts, hope, new depths of relationship with God and new ethical orientations as a disciple of Jesus.

There is much imagery and symbolism in Baptism- You wear a white robe- signifying purity, putting on Christ as in Paul's letters, or the robe of sanctity which Thomas Aquinas spoke of.

You are cleansed with water- signifying removal of original sin or the forgiveness of past sins, imagine the water as the love of God pouring on to you, not just that day but every day.... and you receive the Holy Spirit- the part where the magic really starts to happen.

The sign of the cross is made- you now belong to Christ; you are marked as his. And you are given a lit candle- signifying light from darkness, Christ is the light of the world- recall the beautiful imagery in John's Gospel.

In the 4th century, the service would take place at dawn, you would go down to a baptismal pool, face west- where the sun sets- the region of darkness- you would stand on a goat's skin- why you might ask.... A goat has horns and cloven hooves-

who does that remind you of? You renounce the devil, and then as the sun rises in the east, you physically turn to the region of light. 'I turn to Christ'.

We must not forget that importantly, John came with HOPE- by doing what I say... this will lead to rejoicing- in the joy of Gods eternal kingdom.

Be filled with the Holy Spirit, passion, joy, abundant and everlasting life. Jesus will change your heart, your soul, your being. He will fill your Spirit with the presence of God and fill your life with purpose.

Be generous. Share your abundance with others- this doesn't have to be money, or possessions, it could be time, kindness, patience.

Be people of integrity, do the right thing, even when no-one is looking.

The Gospel is not just what Jesus DOES. It is who Jesus IS. By doing *and* being- we are CHANGED. When we truly embrace Christ, we submit our lives to him. We have the amazing opportunity to become people who seek to be closer to God, 'draw near to God and he will draw near to you' (James 4:7-8) and be the people we are meant to be.

Jesus is here. He is among us now, let us prepare expectantly to meet him, to meet him as we celebrate the eucharist, to meet him as a baby, to meet him in our hearts this advent. Amen.