

Address for 5 December by Belinda Speed-Andrews

Have you ever wondered where John the Baptist has been before he arrives on the banks of the River Jordan declaring that sins will be forgiven if only you will repent? He is a fairly elusive character in the Bible and we don't know much about him, where he has been, what he has been doing and he turns up wearing sackcloth and his diet is one of locusts and honey; not your normal fare even for Middle Eastern cuisine! And his demise is no less eye-opening; he is beheaded at the whim of a King's mistress's daughter; stuff of TV dramas in the 21st century.

There is though something very special about John the Baptist. One of the other readings for this Sunday is the Benedictus, the song of Zechariah. The first 6 verses are directed in praise of God and the last 5 verses are about his son John. It's an interesting reflection by a man who was made mute, for his apparent unbelief when he was told, by an angel, that his wife was pregnant with a boy and that he would be called John. For 9 months Zechariah was dumb and like the season of advent he was made to wait and watch. And in the waiting and the waiting & watching he recognised God's hand in this life that was born and he was released to speak again. And so we have the Benedictus; a reading full of praise and a certainty that his son John, still only a baby at this time, 'will go before the Lord to prepare his way, to give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of all their sins.'

I wonder how we prepare to receive salvation from the one who has come to show us the way in this Advent?

I have two close friends for whom the real nitty gritty housework is only done when they are expecting visitors. I suspect that there are quite a few of us here today for whom that is a reality, as we live in a constantly busy world and more so at this time of the year, and so for some housework is the last thing on our list of priorities, until we know we have guests arriving.

Advent is a season of preparation. We are all thinking about and preparing presents, thinking, when do we put up the Christmas tree, what are we going to have on the menu for Christmas & Boxing Day and who are we going to spend these holidays with. Will the children be home with us for Christmas and who might they be bringing with them? In church we are preparing the services across Advent & Christmas; who is preaching when, who is celebrating when and the musicians are

preparing the music for this wonderful celebration of the arrival of Immanuel, God with us. And we are all hoping and praying that this year might be closer to the Christmas we knew pre Covid.

And in all of this busy-ness, John the Baptist breaks through the noise and clamour. John the Baptist interrupts our preparations and demands that preparations of a different kind be made. John demands that we get ready for the Lord. All 3 synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark & Luke, tell the story of the birth of Jesus, but each gospel writer does it in a different way.

Luke places the narrative of John the Baptist firmly in the middle of the socio-political arena of the time by naming no less than 7 historical, political leaders. Pontius Pilate, Herod, Emperor Tiberius, to name but 3 of these figures, probably wouldn't have been to happy that their names were linked with the coming of God incarnate. But Luke does this to anchor the story of salvation history in the concrete tangible history of the world.

The eastern church regard John the Baptist as the last prophet of the Old Covenant. John appears as if from nowhere and in the middle of nowhere he receives the Word from God. John is the continuation from Old Testament Prophets and the first in the New Covenant he quotes Isaiah:

“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God”.

How many remember or may still even have a rug that has fringes on it? In Malaysia where I lived this was the norm in houses. The best rug came out the time of the Eid celebrations and I can remember, straightening out the fringes on the rug. Just as in this country, Eid was a time when the house was prepared, cleaned and made ready to welcome family & friends over the festival period and food was a big part of the celebration. However, with several children running around the house excited the fringes on the rug didn't stay straight very long!

I don't think John the Baptist would be familiar with straightening rug fringes, but he did understand how people ought to welcome their God. John was calling people

then and he is calling us now, to preparation, through self-examination, together with a to-do list, if people then and now are going to be ready to receive the one coming after him.

I wonder then how we are to prepare ourselves, our church, our community for the way of the Lord?

In the reading from Malachi, the prophet talks about a refiner's fire and fuller's soap. Refining was the process of removing impurities from Ore which when complete left pure silver. The ore was heated to between 1600-1700 degrees Fahrenheit as part of the process. The Fuller's job was to cleanse and whiten cloth and it took place outside the city walls of Jerusalem in the Fuller's field. With the cloth soaking in soap and water, the Fullers beat or stamped the cloth to remove the impurities.

The images of preparation in both readings today, describe methods that take a lot of hard work, a great deal of pain and determination as ways of preparing ourselves and our community for the way of the Lord and so understandably there is and should be a degree of apprehension should we look at these readings and think what they might mean for us today. Do not fear, my job is not to stamp on you or beat you or even to heat you up to high temperatures!

So as God's promise spoken through Malachi or John's proclamation of repentance for the forgiveness of sin is spoken to us today, I wonder what will look different in our Church? Our world? Our lives?

Covid forced the world to stop and Covid has changed the world forever. There is no getting away from that and maybe in some ways the changes are good.

I want to suggest though that Advent is a time when we are invited to stop again, not because a virus dictates that should be so but because we want to see God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven and because we want to be included in those who stand before our Lord and be counted and to achieve that, part of the process is to stop, reflect & repent. We might need to re-calibrate our thinking; we might need to re-centre our lives on and in Christ both personally, & as a community, not just once but over & over again. But it's not just about stopping and turning, it's about stopping & turning & reflecting on our lives. The refining is about looking inside ourselves, looking inside our community and thinking what will God's refining look like for us. When we repent it is a complete 180 degree turn away from where we

are and deciding not to turn back. That is a big part of the refining process and perhaps the impurities will need to be beaten out of us. This is the challenge that John the Baptist faces us with. Make his paths straight; every mountain and hill shall be made low and the crooked shall be made straight - this is not possible literally but this is what we need to try to do and in our repentance, which may feel like these verses of the Gospel, and through the grace of Jesus, paths are made straight, mountains and hills are brought low.

So as part of our Advent preparations I wonder how each of us need to reflect on our lives as part of this community here at St David's and think about what it is that God is calling us to here and now and what it is that we need to repent of first, both individually & perhaps corporately?

I wonder if we need to go to the places where people are, the poor, the dispossessed, the hurting, the hungry and the abused just as John the Baptist did. He did not go to the temple or the city to proclaim God's word, he went to where the people were. So perhaps our watching and our waiting in Advent considers that part of our journey as a Community is to travel beyond the Church out into the community and if that is what we are called to what will it look like?

I have given you a lot of questions and wondering and a lot of 'perhaps' and I don't know the answers, yet, but what I do know is that John the Baptist is opening up the way of the Lord to us here and now this morning, and by the grace of God in Jesus Christ we may be among those standing before our Lord on the day of salvation. And in the words of the Benedictus, 'In the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.'