

Advent 3, year B. 2011

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
Psalm 126
Philippians 4:4-7.
Luke 3:7-18.

I am not

I would expect for the three Sundays in Advent available to us this year that we would have a general 'what is Advent?' Sunday, a John the Baptist Sunday, and a Mary Sunday. That's not how the readings come across this year, and I've found the lessons that are set difficult to develop. SO I'm just going to take them at face value and see what we get.

In Isaiah we have the story of God restoring what was lost, wonderful clothes, beautiful gardens growing, and generally causing good things to happen. In the epistle we are encouraged to rejoice and trust in the lord always. But the message in the gospel is one of warning and admonishing. We are told how to behave. We must share. We must not cheat. Actions are necessary: behaviours are necessary. It is not enough simply to be members of the right club (children of Abraham). Nor two coats, or treasures, or whatever. The last thing we must ever be is complacent.

Perhaps we'll start with that. John was a difficult man. Odd in appearance, odd in diet, and self-effacing. Short shrift if he turned up in most Anglican churches today. JB was certainly an outsider.

Can learn much from outsiders

Only way that new things happen

Otherwise stagnation

People need to push at edges all the time – crucifixion is what results for them, but progress for everyone else.

JB is challenging the people against complacency.

This in itself is a great message. **We must listen to outsiders.** They tell us things that we don't want to hear about ourselves, about our society, but things that speak of the corruption and greed in society.

- There shouldn't need to be prostitutes in Ipswich or Derby if society was justly organised.
- There shouldn't be young homeless people in one of the wealthiest countries of the world – obscenity, more so than sex.
- Capitalism forces us into a competitive struggle. Our security is not to be found in dividing us from one another, but in community. It is in supporting one another, to know that if we fall on difficult times, we have a community willing to support us. This is where security really lies.
- **Disadvantaged people are prophets in society – people who reveal our values, make us uncomfortable.**

Mary too was an outsider. Teenage pregnancy, no father.

Mary the outsider said yes to the Lord.

Mary the outsider provided a home for Jesus to grow and develop.

We have to be outsiders to provide homes for others to grow and develop.

As Jesus changed Mary as a result of developing in her.

We change as a result of allowing others to grow in us.

This means being open minded. If we earnestly want one thing to happen, we are blind to all the other opportunities that may come our way.

Car journey – looking for one thing.

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope

For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love

For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith

But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.

Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:

So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing. Eliot: *East Coker* (1940).

And this means losing my selfness, or rather, absorbing the other person into my selfness. As I feel more and more at home with myself, I can begin losing myself in God, and thus in fellow humans: Rahner 'the love of God and the love of neighbour are one and the same thing'.

This takes great courage. It's easy to fall short when the pressures of life oppress, part of the cross we have to bear living in an imperfect world.
But the model is that of the prodigally gracious father.

This losing of self in the other is exactly what the incarnation is all about, exactly what JB is telling us in today's gospel.

Lavinia Byrne: 'To sidetrack people into preoccupation with their own salvation is to mutilate the gospel message' and my salvation comes from helping others to find theirs.

As minister, my job is to prepare the ground for the Holy Spirit to act, so that like the woman of Samaria at the well, we all can realise that the source of our own lives, and the potential for growth, lies within. When this happens, 'so many of our familiar categories have to be reappraised.'

We have to step out of our comfort zone if we are to develop. We can use Advent, and the message of JB and the example of Mary, to set us up for the new life in Christ.
Home is not where you are comfortable.

What is there to help us on our way?

The epistle

The Holy Spirit

Holy Wisdom

We need courage, discernment, wisdom.

O sapientia. O wisdom, that camest out of the mouth of the Most high, reaching from one end to another, firmly and gently ordering all things: come and teach us the way of understanding.

"Choose a sober lifestyle," and "make an honest assessment your life: they are the exhortations of John the Baptist to Christians during Advent, a period of preparation for Christmas.

Beginning with his outward appearance, John is presented as a very ascetic figure dressed in camel skin, he feeds on locusts and wild honey, found in the desert of Judea (cf. Mk 1.6). Jesus himself once held him in contrast to those who "wear fine clothing" in the "royal palaces" (Mt 11.8).

"The style of John the Baptist was meant to call all Christians to choose a sober lifestyle, especially in preparation for the feast of Christmas, when the Lord - as Saint Paul would say - "became poor although he was rich, so that by his poverty you might become rich"(2 Cor 8.9).

With regard to the John's mission, it was an extraordinary appeal to conversion: his baptism "is tied to a fiery invitation to a new way of thinking and acting, it is above all linked to the announcement of God's justice" (Jesus of Nazareth I, Milan 2007, p. 34) and the imminent appearance of the Messiah, defined as "he who is mightier than I" and who will "baptize with the Holy Spirit" (Mk 1,7.8).

" Therefore, John's appeal - concluded the Pope - goes far beyond and deeper than a call to a sober lifestyle: it is a call for inner change, starting with the recognition and confession of our sins. As we prepare for Christmas, it is important that we find time for self contemplation and carry out an honest assessment of our lives. May we be enlightened by a ray of the light that comes from Bethlehem, the light of He who is "the Greatest" and made himself small, he who is "the Strongest" but became weak".