

Advent 3 year C

We're used to the idea of thinking of JB as the forerunner, the one who prepares the way of the Lord. And so he is. But he is something else as well. JB is one of the great Hebrew prophets, in the line of Elijah, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Amos. The people who make us feel uncomfortable by telling us truths we would rather not hear. The people who force us to confront things as they really are, rather than allowing us to continue in our own deluded way. All pastors have to be prophets: the most pastoral act any priest can perform is to help someone to confront the truth of their situation. Prophets of our own day include the great Desmond Tutu. He insisted that healing could only follow when the people of S Africa confronted the reality of their past. The abscess can only heal when the pus is brought into the daylight, not buried under layers of elastoplasts. This is uncomfortable stuff. It is, as I heard yesterday from the lips of a fellow priest in the presence of the Bishop, my job to disturb the comfortable, as well as comfort the disturbed.

It's always tempting, when we think about people like JB, to think that the story is about other people. About them 2000 years ago, about them out there, or her or him. It's always difficult to acknowledge that the uncomfortable truths are about ourselves. It's easier to find fault with others rather than with ourselves. It's easier to see the splinter in someone else's eye than the beam in our own. We push to the back of our minds the inconvenient truth that we know that what we're doing is wrong, and we scratch around trying to find some justification for it.

We criticize, rightly, the appalling behavior of MPs as pigs with their noses in the trough. We demand resignations and retribution. And yet how many of us would be able to resist the same temptation? How many of us are able to resist the temptation to nick paper from the photocopier at work, or steal a chocolate from an unattended box? Something niggles away in our midst and tells us not to do it, and yet we do it—knowing, somewhere inside us—that we shouldn't. This niggle that tells us we shouldn't have done this or that is our very own prophet living inside our very own mind. Our very own John Baptist.

The people in today's Gospel think John the Baptist must be the Christ, when all he is doing is telling them things they already know—things they shouldn't be doing. The tax collectors know they shouldn't cheat their own people. The soldiers know they shouldn't practice extortion. The MPs know they shouldn't be screwing the taxpayers. But they do it. We do it.

John isn't calling them to a radically different life. He doesn't tell the tax collectors to stop collecting taxes. He doesn't tell the soldiers to give up soldiering. He simply calls them to do what they already know to be right.

There's nothing foolish in these people's wanting to go to someone who sees their moral situation more clearly and can say the things they know to be true, but have conveniently forgotten. Hearing it out of someone else's mouth is challenging—but strangely compelling. They respond to being recalled to themselves, reminded of what they already know, with a certain kind of awe.

John, however, knows that that will not be enough on its own, that what he offers is not the transformation that they really need. Repentance, which is John's message, is a very important part of what we all need, but it's only a part of what will save us; and when I say 'save us', I mean save us from ourselves—salvation from the moral forgetfulness, the moral evasion, that we weave inside and around ourselves—the terrible harm we do to ourselves and others when we act from that forgetfulness.

The tax collectors of the Gospel might well have gone away and tried a bit harder to straighten out their lives, but inevitably, like us, like the MPs, the world was so full of temptations to injustice, no doubt they would soon be up to their old tricks. Like MPs.

We wait with eagerness for the coming of Jesus at Christmas, because through his human life we have an example to show us the way, and we have the assurance of forgiveness when we pick ourselves up, dust ourselves down, and start all over again.

At Barlow

The birth of XXX brings hope to David and Tetyana, to family and friends. Children are a sign of hope for the future, the hope of so many great possibilities, as yet unfulfilled. The birth of the Christ-child brings not just hope for himself but hope for us. We've most of us – at my age anyway - squandered the hope of our births, and for that we need to repent and find forgiveness. But the hope Christ brings is a new birth, not just a second chance. It's a return to the hope of our childhood and even more: a new and certain hope of eternal life, fulfilled life, life of delight lived to the full.

At Loundsley Green

All churches need the voice of a prophet to call them to a realistic view of what is possible in the future,

and to prevent them from becoming just a group of people who gather together for a rather peculiar Sunday morning hobby. This church at this moment in its history needs the voice of a prophet to call us to a realistic view of what is possible for us in the future, to read the signs of the times so that we can plan realistically for the immediate and mid-term future. Let us not shrink from that difficult task, and let us take comfort from the fact that it is divine activity, godly activity, incarnational activity, to get our hands dirty in the muddy business of being human, warts and all.

JB calls us to see ourselves as others see us: stripped of pretence, imperfect, not in control, fallible human beings. That's what makes us lovable.

O wad some Power the giftie gie us To see oursels as ithers see us!