

Sunday 8 December 2024
The Second Sunday of Advent

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Baruch 5.1-9
NT: Philippians 1.3-11
Gp: Luke 3.1-6

‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’

We’re used to the idea that John the Baptist is the forerunner of Jesus. That he points the way for the coming of Christ – ‘one whose sandal I am not worthy to untie,’ as he says.

We’re so used to it, we forget that things were perhaps not so simple in the first century. John was an important figure in his own right. He had his own dedicated followers, not all of whom were convinced that John was there just to hand on the baton to Jesus. The gospels, as we have them, are the product of Christian communities, so it is obviously their interpretation of John that dominates.

But it is not these more historical questions that are my focus. I want to think with you about something else so familiar that we might not always notice it. Something that has the power to shake us out of complacency and shape our understanding of this advent season. It is that sentence from the gospel with which I began: ‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight’.

The really curious thing here is not so much the wilderness, important as that is as a place away from the world, a place of revelation and change. No: it is the idea that John, or anyone for that matter, could *make a path for God*.

The quotation is from Isaiah, chapter 40. We find the imagery of a path or road for God in other places in the Old Testament, including the idea that the mountains will be levelled. But in those cases – even in Isaiah itself a couple of chapters later – it is God who does the roadbuilding. God, in his might and power, demonstrates that power by obliterating any obstacle in his path. The seas recoil, the mountains smoke, all creation is subservient to the coming of its Lord. Nothing can stand in God’s way.

But here, in the gospel, it is a lone voice in the wilderness that cries out. Imagine it: almost lost and fragile in all that vastness. A voice that evaporates in the heat, or falls like dust to the ground. And yet it cries out. It cries out: prepare a path for God, make God’s roads straight.

For Luke’s gospel, John the Baptist is the one who will prepare that path, as his father Zechariah says of him in chapter 1: ‘you my child will be a prophet of the Most High for you will go ahead of the Lord to prepare his way before him.’ But John is also the voice in the wilderness, calling *others* to make that path ready. He calls out to the people of his day. He calls to us now.

How can we make a path for God? It sounds absurd. How can God’s power ever need *our* help?

Surely this points to something fundamental – even shockingly so – about the Advent season: that God gives himself, herself, into our hands. God, out of love, becomes dependent – on *us*. That is a thought that must shake us to the core.

It is a thought that can lead us deeper into the mystery of Advent. Of course, Advent is about getting ready for Christmas. We remember all the preparation for Jesus' coming: prophets and patriarchs, John and Mary. It can seem like everything is just the outcome of a foreordained plan. But is it this simple?

It is true that the coming of Jesus, the Word made flesh, is rooted in the unchanging love and intention of God. But history is not a machine, and we are not puppets. What would be the point of creation, what would be the point of us, if we were just following a script laid out for us? Too much talk of God's plan obscures our freedom and the freedom of God: to do something unexpected, to overturn what we thought we knew.

Surely, God becoming human, the infinite being confined to the little space of Mary's womb, the omnipotent becoming helpless: all this radically rewrites the script. It challenges everything we thought we knew about God. It takes our fixation with power and control and shows it up for an idol. In Jesus, God empties himself and takes the form of a human being, of a baby, of a slave, of a cursed and condemned criminal.

What about the other traditional way of looking at Advent: as preparing us for the end of the age, for death, judgement, heaven and hell? John the Baptist seems to have looked for that day when God would come as judge in power and wrath. Many did. Many do.

But again, the coming of Jesus upends all of this. Too much of our talk of judgement and the end of the world is really a projection of our fears and our desires to get even. We fear - and long for - a God who will use force, a violence that no one can resist, in order to get justice done.

But that is the way of a fallen world. And it is not what Jesus does. Jesus shows us a God who is utterly defenceless. No armies, no legions of angels. A God who loves people into conversion, who seeks out the lost, who runs to meet the prodigal - rather than a God who is an angry and disapproving judge, whom we must please and sacrifice to before he will grant us anything.

All this implies something truly astonishing: that God chooses to enlist *us* as co-workers. God chooses to show the power of love by inviting *us* to help make it real. God chooses to transform the world through hands and hearts like yours and mine.

The voice in the wilderness calls to you and I: make a path for our God to come into the world. Be the ones who help prepare the way for the Lord. Not because we are strong or in control, but because our hearts are unlocked by the coming of God in the flesh; our hands are opened by the gift of God in his body and blood. It is God's coming to us, God's self-emptying that gives us the strength to open a way for love to be born.

That voice calls in the wildernesses of today: in the traumatised camps of Gaza; from the victims of ethnic cleansing in Sudan; in the trenches of Ukraine; in the forgotten places of poverty. The voice calls, with urgency, for us to end the reign of death and dehumanisation. For God is not on the side of whoever happens to have the most power, wealth and guns. God is on the side of bare humanity, of life itself: mortal, vulnerable and aching for fulfilment.

Today, it seems that the voice in the wilderness often belongs to someone abused in the church - the very place where they should have been loved and safe. How often has the voice of the victim gone unheard? Even now, after all that has come out in the John Smyth affair and his horrendous cruelty to dozens of boys, after the powerful in the church have

been shown neglecting their duty of care, we have had the Archbishop of Canterbury delivering a shamefully tone-deaf speech in the House of Lords, joking and laughing about his resignation. He has rightly apologised, but the damage has been done.

So: every time we listen to the abused and hold the powerful to account; every time we offer a hand of kindness or a word of friendship to someone else; every time we practise inclusive welcome; every time we, like voices in the wilderness, speak truth to power and to those who stoke injustice, war and hatred; every time we take joy in creation and all its living creatures: every time we do these things, we are making a path for God. We are helping to give birth to God in our world. We are meeting God. Not necessarily in world changing events, but also in the simple, small and ordinary experiences of love and connection.

It is a way that John the Baptist points to. It is the way that Our Lady Mary embodies, for she is the one in whom God comes to be, the one without whom God could not even have drawn breath. God *relies* on her 'yes', her decision of faith. Her listening, thinking, courage and faithfulness are a model for us all. In this, as John's gospel says, she is our mother too.

So, with our Lady, with John the Baptist, and with everyone who makes a way for God to come into the world. let us keep Advent as a time of radical conversion, a time of wonder, a time for the mystery of love to be born in each one of us.

Fr Steven Shakespeare