

**Sunday 7 December 2025**  
**The Second Sunday of Advent**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**OT: Isaiah 11:1-10**  
**NT: Romans 15:4-13**  
**Gp: Matthew 3:1-12**

Last September, I was fortunate to spend a weekend in Milano where I preached at the Anglican chaplaincy there and managed to browse through an Italian gallery or two. I noticed that one often sees in the paintings of the Nativity by the masters of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries a background of overgrown ruins behind the Holy Family, a world fallen apart. And on this second Sunday of Advent, we are indeed reminded that the Gospel begins very much in the wilderness – a landscape that some think of as that of loss and half-forgotten stones. Into that wilderness strides the figure of John the Baptist.

Whilst many have already started singing 'Jingle Bells' and 'I am dreaming of a white Christmas', our Gospel today wants us to keep that image of the wilderness in mind. I am sure that at the myriads of carol services in this church this month, many will also be singing of how sweet the baby is, 'away in a manger', or 'Once in Royal David's city', etc... It is fatally easy for sentiment to replace awe in religious language, especially in an age as sentimental as our own. But perhaps we must tear our gaze from the accessible foreground from time to time and walk about the ruins to begin to make sense of the transforming act of God that appears at Christmas and that will allow us to sing in the famous hymn, 'God of God, Light of Light' and 'Of the Father's heart begotten', 'A great and mighty wonder, a full and holy cure'.

John the Baptist appears to speak of that reconciling act of God, of the relation between the present and future, earth and heaven. You might say that John the Baptist had a dual nationality, he is a border land figure and as such he is a challenging figure too. He lived in the wilderness and at the sharpest edge of human reality that we can imagine. He lives between the old covenant and the new. He lives as a representation of the spirit and power of Elijah and as the forerunner of the saviour of all humanity. Jesus describes him as the 'greatest of those born among humans', yet 'less than the least in the kingdom of heaven'.

Here is a man who lives on the frontier, and whose work and preaching expresses that double nationality. He is a native of his own people. He comes from the very heart of the Jewish identity. His conception is announced in the sanctuary of the temple. He summons the people of Israel to be themselves as never before, to be true children of Abraham, to find in promise and compassion, in faithfulness, courage and welcome what their identity must be, a bit like the prophet Amos before him. He does this because of what he does not quite yet see or fully understand – the new world, the kingdom that is about to dawn, the kingdom of which he is not yet a citizen where all this will focus on the figure of his kinsman,

Jesus of Nazareth. He looks towards that future that he does not see. And in one of the most poignant passages of the New Testament, also in Matthew's gospel, he sends messengers to Jesus, to say, 'it is you, isn't it?'. And Jesus wonderfully replies: 'go and tell John what you hear and see'.

It appears then that the ruins of the wilderness do not simply represent the deposit of pointless hardships. We might ask John the Baptist if we met him what was it like to see this wilderness as home? What might it be to see them now as a potential home? In the wilderness, John the Baptist points to the shortcomings of the world around him, and to the freedom of God in ushering in the Kingdom of heaven. One of the great Anglican theologians of the early twentieth century, someone called J.N. Figgis (a formidable historian of political theory, a reluctant ordinand, and recruit to the Community of the Resurrection at Mirfield in West Yorkshire in its early days) said: 'Freedom was seen to involve far more than had been thought'. He was talking about the discovery of God's freedom; God is so free and so other that he deigns to share in human life without ceasing to be God; he does not hold anything back. To acknowledge that, requires a particular type of humility and caritas (as St Augustine of Hippo told us); the discovery of God's freedom is directly connected with the experience of repentance, to which John the Baptist was calling.

Such language of course does annoy some people who think that this means if we obediently confessed our sins asking no questions, all shall be well. But this would be to trivialize what is meant by the Baptist's proclamation. He is doing something difficult and rather costly – the process by which the wilderness becomes a place to live in, as he points to the one who is to come. As we persist with the discipline of preparation, watching and waiting, looking around the wilderness of our own lives and world, we begin to sense reality more deeply. And that reality is bound up with the whole painful and long process of exploring the new world defined by Christ, by the action of God in this life and death in Palestine.

The prophet Isaiah foretells of this new world in terms of the 'wolf living with the lamb and leopard lying down with the kid...the cow and the bear grazing', whilst St Paul urges the Romans to live with harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus' and by implication calls us to 'welcome one another just as Christ has welcomed you'. The gospel of Christ that starts with John the Baptist in the wilderness, it seems, is more than just a simplistic moral message. It simply witnesses, like the Baptist did, to the one who is coming as the Truth; as such, the gospel neither makes decisions or gives simple answers, nor does it appeal to private good intentions or bland calls to more and better prayers. It claims to speak of the truth about the world and the landscape that we inhabit; it asks us if we have come to see the price we pay for our illusions, and where we want to locate ourselves in the landscape of which a Jewish peasant is in fact the monarch. In light of that truth, it calls us for truthful living, and it binds us in an unbreakable relation with the embodied Word of God, and asks before all else, as the Baptist did, for repentance, without which there is no truth.

‘Welcome one another just as Christ has welcomed you’, says St Paul. If we interpret this truth about Christ, as welcoming and being attentive to one another and the stranger, as we are attentive to and welcome Christ, then conflict becomes – at least – problematic; indeed, ‘in him the gentiles shall hope’. If we are prepared to spend time this Advent letting the freedom of God to sink in, absorbing that freedom in action, there is no limit to what we might learn. And as we prepare to welcome our new rector, we pray for him and ourselves that at this altar, we may allow ourselves to let the Eucharist sink in, which in the Eastern church is described as the divine fire, not simply mere bread and wine, but the living coal that purifies, transforms, and enkindles us.

**Fr Yazid Said**