

Talk for All Age Service 4 December 2022

The second Sunday in advent. Theme – **The prophets**

We start with a quiz about prophets (*statements about prophets requiring true/false response on the screen*)

We zoom in on one particular prophet today – John Baptist. He shows some of the marks of a true prophet (see *quiz*) – strange appearance (animal skins and weird diet), but above all his message – fearlessly addressing the religious leaders of his day. He doesn't mince his words, 'You vipers brood!' Looking over the horizon to what lies ahead, and telling people to change before it's too late.

Matthew, the writer of today's gospel, like Mark and Luke, quotes from the prophet Isaiah when introducing John the Baptist, describing him as a 'voice crying in the wilderness, prepare a way for the Lord'. They've changed the punctuation slightly; in the book of Isaiah it reads, 'A voice of one crying, in the wilderness prepare a way for the Lord'. Isaiah was addressing his people as they faced exile and perhaps a long trek through desert country to reach Babylon. Yet, in that very desert, that apparently hopeless place, he encourages them to be preparing a way for the Lord. God in the midst of their exile. God in the midst of their desert, their wilderness. There is a future. There is hope.

John the Baptist, by bringing people to that dry desert place around the river Jordan, is perhaps drawing them away from their usual activities so that they can better hear his message. It's the same message as that of Isaiah, but the wilderness is more the places in their own lives where change is needed if they are to be ready for that message of hope – God's kingdom is very near.

However, in keeping with Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Hosea and all the great prophets we can assume that John was also declaring that message in relation to the wilderness places of the Roman empire. For the prophets were not only calling for a change in mind and heart but also so often for political change, a change of regime. For them the acid test of Israel's behaviour as a nation and of that of the countries around them was the extent to which they reflected God's justice and mercy.

During Advent our readings invite us to be ready for Christ's coming, challenging us to address those wilderness places not only in our personal lives but also in our world. How do you prepare a way through the wilderness of war torn Ukraine, or the vast tracts of cleared forest in the Amazon, or the drought affected lands in Africa, or oppressive authoritarian regimes? Well, you need to have voices in the wilderness. Voices that say there is another way.

As far as we know John the Baptist was the only prophet to offer baptism. In this respect he was perhaps a little kinder than his predecessors. He was giving people a way of expressing their desire for a change of regime – the coming of God's kingdom- ie a society where God's justice and mercy are practised, whilst also recognising the need for change in themselves if that change in society was to happen.

Well, we can't jump into the Jordan river today, but we do have our reminder of baptism in the font over there. Today there are some pebbles beside it. During communion I invite you to consider any change you desire in yourself and/or in the world at large and drop a pebble in the font as a way of saying, 'Yes, I desire and hope for that change. Help me to be part of making it happen.'

Maranatha. **Come, Lord Jesus**

Christine Bainbridge