



## Revd Ro's Reflection on The Second Sunday of Advent Year C

**Philippians 1.3-11**

**Luke 3.1-6**

This Sunday, the second Advent candle will be lit in churches and homes throughout the land. The symbolism associated with the Advent crown is fascinating and it seems ever evolving. I thought it might be interesting to look at this. In the Church of England the meaning of the candles, (purple is the penitential colour) is linked to the lectionary readings for Advent, each candle representing those who look for the coming of Christ, the patriarchs, the prophets, John the Baptist, and Mary the mother of Jesus. In the centre is the Christ candle, lit on Christmas day symbolising Christ as light of the world.

The wreath of evergreen is circular and represents God's infinite love for us. Of course because it is evergreen this symbolises the hope of eternal life through Jesus Christ. Another symbolic version of the candles is that they represent hope, peace, joy and love. The third candle is sometimes pink or rose coloured; this third Sunday is Gaudete Sunday, this comes from the Latin meaning 'rejoice ye'. The candles are also sometimes known as the God's People candle, the Bethlehem, Shepherds and the Angel's candles. The Advent wreath is a lovely way, not just to countdown to Christmas but to remind us of the meaning.

Last week we were looking at Jesus' teaching in Jerusalem during the last week of his life, we were looking at his sombre warning of the destruction of the Temple and the holocaust that was to hit Jerusalem. Indeed all that happened in AD70. It has an echo of course of the end time.

Our Gospel reading today goes right back to the beginning in that Jesus has not yet begun his ministry. The emphasis is on John the Baptist but it looks back to Isaiah one of the greatest of all the prophets. John is, of course, the penultimate prophet. He is the forerunner, the herald of Jesus, last of the prophets, through whom God makes his final covenant.

I think it is useful to look back to the canticle set for today, it is The Benedictus, it is part of the Morning office. It is of course the words of Zechariah, the father of John, who is speaking of his infant son.

Luke 1:

<sup>67</sup> 'Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

<sup>68</sup> 'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,

for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.

<sup>69</sup> He has raised up a mighty saviour for us

in the house of his servant David,

<sup>70</sup> as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

<sup>71</sup> that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.'

He emphasises that the coming of a 'mighty saviour' of David's line is imminent and that he will rescue Israel. His son will be a prophet and he will be the forerunner of the saviour. John is the NOT the long awaited one

<sup>76</sup> 'And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;

for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

<sup>77</sup> to give knowledge of salvation to his people

by the forgiveness of their sins.'

Luke is at pains to set his account firmly in history. He is pointing out that it is fact; this is when it happened. Throughout my life when I have read this (Luke Chapter 3), two phrases have jumped out to me, 'Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea,' and 2 'during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas,' Well these phrases take us straight back to the last week of Jesus' life. It has always made me feel danger and a sense of foreboding. Here are these three men who caused Jesus' death, mentioned just before the very start of his ministry. I don't believe that is accidental. I think Luke wants these names to ring in our ears, to be there in the background to illustrate that even then, powerful and dangerous men will destroy him.

As well as that and looking back to Zechariah's speech once more, we see these words, 'that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.'

So then, two things; the saviour is coming and John is the herald. Throughout the ages prophets have foretold the coming of the saviour who will free them from oppression.

The beginning of the reading is a list of Kings, Romans and high priests. All corrupt, all oppressors. The House of Herod the Great was not of David's royal line, this had died out years before. These are self-styled rulers by permission of their Roman masters. Pilate is a brute, and the high priests are corrupt. The people are abused and downtrodden. They feel that it is a long time since God has spoken to them through the prophets, has he abandoned them to their suffering? Then suddenly there appears a new young man on the banks of the Jordan River. A man whom his father had called 'a prophet of the most high,' no wonder people flocked to him. He is preaching repentance for sins.

Added to this Luke quotes verses from Isaiah, one of the greatest of the prophets, as being a specific reference to John who is the herald of Jesus, God's Son.

The quotation itself is changed slightly too to emphasise Luke's meaning.

<sup>3</sup>He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, <sup>4</sup>as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

"Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.

<sup>5</sup>Every valley shall be filled,  
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,  
and the crooked shall be made straight,  
and the rough ways made smooth;

<sup>6</sup> and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." '

It doesn't say quite that in Isaiah 40, note the difference.

<sup>3</sup> 'A voice cries out:

'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'

The punctuation is different, notice the colon after 'cries out' in Isaiah, it is followed by 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,' So Isaiah says prepare the way of the Lord in the wilderness and make his paths straight. That could be seen as the wilderness of behaviour and sin that is Israel. The prophet must prepare the way of the Lord through repentance.

In Luke we have, 'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

"Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

Where is the voice? The voice is in the wilderness, that is where John is so Luke is emphasising that John is the voice predicted by Isaiah. It seems a small point but it is vital. We see the importance of John here.

It shows clearly how Luke and the gospel writers viewed John. John has a place at the very beginning of St. John's gospel; he leaves the reader in no doubt of his purpose and importance as 'prophet of the most high' and herald of Jesus.

<sup>6</sup> 'There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup>He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup>He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.'

John the Baptist, then, is preparing the way for Jesus, how is this done? It is done by telling people to repent of their sins and turn again to God. This is the message of Isaiah and all the prophets. Israel had strayed far from God; but they wanted another Exodus, a freeing from tyranny and oppression. This came at a price. The people must turn from sin and turn to God. Really turn to him. That is John's message. At the Exodus they crossed the Jordan to freedom. John stands at the Jordan offering to wash them clean in the waters of baptism.

Many people respond to John's call, He is quite clearly seen as a prophet with authority from God. John does not simply offer a symbol given easily. Just look how next week's reading begins,

<sup>7</sup> 'John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup>Bear fruits worthy of repentance.'

John was afire with the Spirit of God; there is no manipulating him, no pulling the wool over his eyes. John wants and demands sincerity. To repent means to turn away from sin, to be cleansed and live a new and Godly life. He will demand nothing less than their all.

John is preparing the way for God's Anointed One and when he sees Jesus he will recognise him as such. Next week we will light the candle representing John the Baptist and our gospel reading will reflect this.

Our epistle reading is from the first chapter of Philippians. Philippi was the first town in Europe that Paul and Silas preached the Good News of Jesus Christ as King and Saviour. The story of this can be found in Acts 16. The town of Philippi in northern Greece was conquered by the Macedonians and then occupied by the Romans. It became a Roman colony in BC42.

By the time Paul and Silas arrived in Philippi the descendants of these veterans were living there with the local inhabitants. So the people here were from the three great civilizations. Roman culture was firmly established. They would have believed in the 'Imperial Cult' that is the Emperor as Lord and god. He was to be worshiped and woe betide anyone that was not prepared to say, 'Caesar is Lord.' For Christians only Jesus is Lord and many would pay with their lives for refusing to accept emperor worship. Into this cultural mix then, Paul and Silas brought Christianity. They preached Jesus as the only Lord and Saviour who died and rose again to save humanity. To believe this and to preach it was very dangerous for these first Christians.

Paul was in prison, probably in Ephesus around AD 52-55 when he wrote the letter, he obviously has a great fondness for these Christians as he says,

<sup>8</sup> 'For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.'

Paul would love to be with them but he explains that his arrest has not prevented him from spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ. Indeed while he has been in prison he has continued to do so, not only that, but people have been emboldened to follow his example and to do the same.

<sup>12</sup> ' I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, <sup>13</sup>so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ;'

What a tireless worker Paul is, still afire for his King Jesus even in prison preaching to his guards. One wonders if the seeds he sowed there came to fruition.

The beginning of this letter has a wonderful and affectionate tone. Once again the central emphasis is on prayer. For Paul prayer is at the centre of everything. He knows the persecution and dangers these Christians will face, he has suffered there himself.

<sup>3</sup> 'I thank my God every time I remember you, <sup>4</sup>constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, <sup>5</sup>because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.'

It is such a joyful and encouraging greeting. I am sure we all feel encouraged and strengthened when somebody says, 'I will hold you in my prayers.' We should never underestimate the power of prayer and the help it gives to those we pray for sincerely. Of course the Christians in Philippi are praying for Paul and long to see him again.

<sup>7</sup> 'It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel. '

Paul's care and love for them shines through. He longs to be free to continue his missionary work. As apostle to the Gentiles there is much for him to do. He tells them to remain steadfast in the faith, to remain true to his teaching of Jesus and live it out in their lives. In that way they will be ready to meet their King Jesus when he comes again. They have riches in that Jesus died for all, and they have, through God's Grace freely given, the promise of forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

<sup>9</sup>And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight <sup>10</sup>to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, <sup>11</sup>having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.'

Love is at the centre, love for God and love for one another. Love will unite the community. They must stand firm in the teachings they have been given and they will know how to behave. Love of God and trust in him will mean that they are strengthened in their faith.

Paul knows that though he is no longer with them the Spirit of God is. That they will be strengthened by that Spirit in their Christian lives and in all that they will have to face.

It is wonderful that the Holy Spirit is with us now strengthening and sustaining us. I am sure that we can all think of specific times in our lives when we have felt God very near to us. Jesus is with us, walking alongside us. It is good to think this as we live our lives, as we make our decisions, but also to remember Jesus is near, so what would he have us do?

We have all heard of this by Yeats, 'Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.' But this quotation was from this month's meditation at Spital Chapel on kindness and compassion. 'Be kind because everyone you meet is facing a hard battle.' I sometimes think the time for resolutions is Advent as we reflect on our behaviour and prepare for the coming of our King Jesus. These two are not a bad guide.

*'Praise him with alleluias for Jesus is Lord'* D J Mansell

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