



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

Philippians 4.4-7

Luke 3.7-18

I am sure we can all remember the joy and expectation we felt when, as children, we approached Christmas. It has a magic all of its own. For me that was not simply because I knew there would be a pillow case bulging with surprises waiting for me downstairs on Christmas morning. I always sensed a 'something else' about that day. If I was asked to put it into words I couldn't have done so, but the feeling was very real. I was brought up as a Christian and the birth of that tiny baby in a stable in Bethlehem, yet the King of the world, was very real to me even then. It was that knowledge which accounted for the wonder.

It is appropriate then that this Sunday, the Third Sunday in Advent, is known as Gaudete Sunday, and this comes from the Latin meaning 'rejoice ye.' The third Advent candle is often pink. On this Sunday by tradition the emphasis turns from penitence to joy as we look forward to the coming of our King Jesus at Christmas. The third candle also is when we remember John the Baptist. As a child I can remember finding John scary, maybe because he was such a forceful figure. I remember my father, who was a Roman Catholic, taking me to see the church of St. John the Baptist in town. I must have been very tiny. I knew the story of John and thought he must have been strange to eat locusts! But I sensed even then that John was holy, powerful, clear sighted and determined. As dad put it, he was the messenger of God.

John was a special child, when Mary visited Elizabeth to tell her of the angel's visit and of the news of her child; Elizabeth, who until now had no children, said she felt her child leap in her womb. We saw his father Zechariah, foretell of John's future, Luke 1:

⁷⁶ 'And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.'

So here he stands in the wilderness by the Jordan River waiting to baptise and preaching repentance. Here is the penultimate prophet preparing the way for his Messiah. As I said last week John did not simply give baptism, it had to be earned by sincerity. People must turn away from their sinful ways and turn to God once more. It is by doing this work that John is preparing a way in the wilderness for his God, it is in this way that he is making the paths straight and the hills low. He is baptising for repentance so that the way is prepared for Jesus and thus ^{3.6} 'all flesh shall see the salvation of God.' '

John stands out like a giant. He has a forceful, larger than life personality and a spirit that is afire for his Lord. He knows what his purpose is and he is no push over. There is no pulling the wool over John's eyes. He knows exactly what is wrong with Israel. The Lord had made covenants with them but they had broken them and strayed from him so many times. We have a list at the beginning of the chapter of the rulers of the people, all of them corrupt. The people need a saviour but they must play their part. John knows that they have strayed from God; it is time to return.

They feel that there has been little sign from God for many years, has he deserted them? Then suddenly, by the Jordan, the river they crossed when God brought them into the Promised Land, there appears this prophet, afire with the word of God. Of course the people flock to him. They are, in Luke's gospel, greeted with these words:

⁷ 'John said to the crowds that came out to be baptised by him, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? '

We know the symbolic meaning of the snake; we know in reality how deadly they are, full of poison. So it's a pretty big insult. But that is typical of John; he tells it like it is, anyway there is not much time. People were too complacent, we are alright, we are children of Abraham, we are God's chosen ones, so that makes everything fine, and we are superior to the rest of the world so that is enough to guarantee salvation. How wrong they are,

⁸'Do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.'

As I have said so many times before it is made clear throughout the Bible that it is not enough to say 'I believe' only, action is required.

⁸'Bear fruits worthy of repentance. You must repent, turn away from sin and live according to God's will. ⁹'Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.'

There will be judgement and there is no escaping that fact. John is demanding a real grass roots change of heart and change in behaviour. Baptism is the 'outward and visible sign' of that.

The crowds ask to know what is required of them, ¹⁰ 'And the crowds asked him, 'What then should we do?' John's answer is simple, change your behaviour and turn your lives around. Stop the corrupt behaviour that has become the norm for you. It is interesting to look at what he says because it gives us a real insight into his audience.

¹¹In reply he said to them, 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.' ¹²Even tax-collectors came to be baptised, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?' ¹³He said to them, 'Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.' ¹⁴Soldiers also asked him, 'And we, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.'

Even the outsiders such as tax collectors and indeed soldiers came to him. John certainly was having a huge impact. His fame was spreading. The question which follows was inevitable.

¹⁵ 'As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah.'

That was the natural assumption. One of the things that has always impressed me about John is his lack of ambition for himself, his absolute humility and lack of self-aggrandisement. 'He must increase, I must decrease.'

John knows his purpose, he is the forerunner, he is the 'herald of good tidings', he is the one who 'prepares the way' for the Messiah.

¹⁶ 'John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptise you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.'

He leaves them in no doubt about that. The Messiah is coming, and he, John, is so much less than him. He is not fit to untie his shoelaces! John is baptising with water but the Messiah is sent from God, his baptism will be with the Holy Spirit. He will demand absolute repentance and he will be the ultimate judge in God's name. It is a stark warning John issues to the people but it is a message of great joy and hope too. The Messiah is coming; his advent is near for all who have eyes to see. Luke finishes with the words, ¹⁸ 'So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.'

John recognises Jesus when he sees him and does not think he is fit to baptise him and yet in humble obedience to his Lord he does so.

²¹'Now when all the people were baptised, and when Jesus also had been baptised and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²²and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

Jesus is seen quite clearly as God's son and he is given authorisation as the voice from heaven addresses him. We have seen something of John's fearless character. He stands up for what is right and he condemns what is wrong irrespective of the danger it incurs. It is a lesson for us all. Not for John the bowing to those in authority simply because they wield power. For John, right is right, and he publicly condemns wrongdoing wherever it appears. When he sees it in the court of King Herod he is quick to condemn it. Herod was an evil bully, added to which Herod had committed a sin in marrying his brother Phillip's wife, Herodias. To John that is anathema and he roundly says so. Luke says,

¹⁹But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, ²⁰added to them all by shutting up John in prison.'

John has the courage of his convictions and he suffers a martyr's fate. He stands up for God come what may and there is no expediency, no compromise, no rule for the rich and powerful and another for the poor. Again we need to learn from this. We must obey our conscience and stand up for what we know to be right even at personal cost. Being a Christian is not easy.

John is a towering figure, a man of integrity and courage, a man who was pleased to see two of his own disciples join Jesus. A man in whom there is no jealousy and a great humility, a man afire with the love of God. John is the figure who really does stand out in the Advent season as the one who 'prepares the way of the Lord.'

Our epistle reading is from Philippians chapter four. ⁴ 'Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.' What a fitting way for a reading on Gaudete Sunday to begin! Paul is writing his letter from prison, probably in Ephesus. He has suffered a great deal in Philippi and he knows the troubles the fledgling church there will have to face. He cares for all the churches he has founded but it seems from the tone he has a special fondness for the Philippian Christians. It must have been really tough sometimes to 'Rejoice in the Lord' when either persecution was upon you or you lived in fear of it. Yet Paul knows that the real deep joy of Christ can sustain you in anything as indeed it does him.

Just pause and think for a moment of the last time you saw joy on the face of another person. So many T.V. adverts have the underlying message that if you buy so and so you will get joy from it and life will be great. That is not real joy and these false messages are pretty superficial. Put this next to a programme which I saw a long time ago about the Mother's Union presenting a cow to a community in Africa, to the women of the M.U there. When she was unloaded I looked at the faces of those women and I saw real joy! That cow would turn their lives around! Fittingly they named her, 'Mary Rejoice.' Mary in honour of Mary Sumner, the founder of the M.U and Rejoice because of the profound joy she brought to them. The phrase 'turned their lives around' is of course the link here.

Jesus does just that. We know the community in which the Philippians lived, the cruel and fickle deities they had worshipped and the oppressive nature of Emperor Worship. Now here was the true God, the God of love, the God who loved humanity so much he died for them and won salvation for them. Jesus rose again conquering death forever. This is the God who really turns lives around. Jesus Christ then is the cause of real rejoicing and whatever you have to face he is with you. What a wonderful message.

The chapter had started by Paul imploring two of the women of the church who had obviously had some falling out to be at peace.

² I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. ³Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women,'

We do not know who the 'companion' referred to here is but he is obviously known to Paul. It must have been a serious and far reaching falling out for it to have reached Paul in prison. He knew that

arguments, feuds and anger cause division. Sometimes they can destroy communities and churches as people take sides. These women are good people, Paul's co-workers; they are risking it all by this dis-ease. It needs sorting. That is true in any community; any church or, as with a stone thrown into a pool, it can cause a great disturbance! How different are Paul's words in our passage from this situation in Philippi.

What Paul outlines in our reading for today is how things should be.

⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.'

Gentleness, kindness, consideration for others must be at the heart of the church. It is back to Jesus;' commandment, 'Love one another as I have loved you.' There is no room for anger in that.

It is a beautiful passage. Pauls says 'Do not worry about anything.'

And my word they had enough to worry about, but the love of Jesus should supersede that.

Incidentally it is often true that persecuted churches grow the fastest and are strong. I am a great worrier and someone once brought me a candle around which was written, 'Worry ends where faith begins,' a salutary lesson for me and exactly Paul's message. Whatever the storms of life are, the risen Jesus walks alongside to strengthen us. We have a wonderful relationship with our God who is as near as our own breathing as well as being, 'High King of heaven' and we talk to God in prayer.

⁶'but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.'

As we pray we pray for the 'big things in the world', in intercession we bring others before God. But God is there with us, we have a personal relationship and we must talk to him of ourselves and our needs. That is where we have our great strength. God is 'A very present help in times of trouble.'

The ending of our reading is so familiar to us. Those words of St. Paul addressed to the church in Philippi so long ago have been said in churches down the ages. It is a familiar blessing and how very beautiful.

⁷'And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.'

I have heard this blessing so many times and indeed have used it often but it never fails to move me. During this time of uncertainty and disease we are fearful. This is a good blessing to recite and I have sat in Spital Chapel and meditated in the silence on this. 'The peace of God which surpasses all understanding,' that peace is so much more than we can grasp but we know and feel it in our hearts infusing us with deep calm. Jesus Christ brings healing and peace. The God of love is with us at every moment. These words are from the form of mid-week service I used to use at Spital: 'God is with us we are not alone, thanks be to God.'

I will finish with the words addressed to the Philippians just after our passage. Paul instructs them in Christian behaviour.

⁸ 'Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything

worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹ Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.'

God's presence will guard our 'hearts and minds in Jesus Christ.'

'On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry announces that the Lord is nigh; Awake, and harken for he brings glad tidings of the King of Kings.' C Coffin.

~~~~~