

Sermon Advent 3 John 1 6-8; 19-28

‘I am a voice crying out in the wilderness. Make straight the way for the Lord’, replies John the Baptist when asked to give an account of himself. It is in the stark isolation of a place far from civilisation that the Holy Spirit manifests itself and John experiences the reality of God’s presence. Frequently in the bible – and in the experiences of religious mystics – remote and desolate places are associated with encounters with the sacred. The complete physical vulnerability of inhabiting such an environment such mirrors a spiritual comprehension of dependence and need. In the church calendar, Advent is understood as a time of watching and waiting in darkness. We make space in our lives for God to enter into our midst as we celebrate the eternal mystery of the incarnation: God being born into our world in Jesus.

Advent is not well understood in the popular imagination, nor probably in the minds of many Christians. Like Lent, it is traditionally a season of fasting and expectation, but is seen less as such. That is largely because, though Easter is the most important of the church festivals, Christmas ranks far higher in the public consciousness - a time of celebration and rejoicing for all, whether churchgoer or not. The period of Advent has become synonymous for many as ‘the run-up to Christmas’ - a time of office parties, present buying, socialising and preparing for the big day. Even with good intentions, it can feel as though we inhabit a double life at this time: one moment waiting and watching in expectation, and the next doing endless tasks in order to plan and choreograph what is for many the busiest time of the year. And even as we seek to inhabit that place and space of uncertainty, we also know the outcome: that we will usher in Christmas with carols and greetings; the church will be adorned; we will gaze at the crib; families will meet together; the congregation will gather, sing carols and exchange Christmas greetings; for a few days, time will seem to move perhaps to a different plane. Even if we find this time of year difficult - perhaps because of a bereavement - the familiarity of the external events are a given, something predictable when nothing else makes sense. Until this year, that is. This year, the seamless pattern of our lives has been interrupted; a seismic shift has been forced upon us by a global pandemic.

Coronavirus has brought home with stark suddenness the truth that none of us is in control of our future: whether we will rejoice or mourn; survive or perish; prosper or fail. Although there is now the great hope that the vaccine will restore us to some form of normality, the path to it, or whether indeed things will ever be quite the same, remains far from straightforward. Our vulnerability has been laid bare; the past nine months have placed humanity in a bleak and desolate place. But is that not the spiritual place of John the Baptist; is this not the setting for Advent: a space of unknowing, of accepting uncertainty - and yet remaining faithful and vigilant for signs of God's presence? Like the great events of Holy week and Easter, the purpose of the Advent liturgy is to seek to travel with those who experienced the coming of Christ; his birth, death and resurrection. The traditional Advent themes of death and judgment are intended to make us meditate on the 'eternal things' - hence the emphasis on 'end times' in the bible readings at this time of year.

The unexpected gift of our situation - though it may seem anything but that - is that we are more likely to experience Advent without the benefit of hindsight: to remain in that 'wilderness' place; to accept the vulnerability of spiritual emptiness and a yearning for God's presence without knowing the outcome. The writer Anthony Bloom puts it like this: 'The day when God is absent, when he is silent - that is the beginning of prayer. Not when we have a lot to say, but when we say to God, 'I can't live without you...This knowledge that we must find or die - that makes us break through the place we are in the Presence...only if we stand completely open before the unknown, can the unknown reveal himself to us as we are today.'

So often in the bible, spiritual struggle and emptiness precedes the assurance of God's presence; the awareness of our need for God part of that journey of recognition. Just as Lent and Holy Week are bound up with the mystery of Easter, so the waiting of Advent is integral to the joy of Christmas. And though Christmas will almost certainly feel strange this year, both within and outside church, the seasons of the Church speak not just to a concrete set of dates, but of an eternal truth. The Advent hiddenness of God is part of that reality; and yet that truth too is absorbed by the verses which precede today's Gospel: 'the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has never overcome it.' How

different from previous years does this Advent feel to you, with the events of our lives seemingly in tune, perhaps as never before, with this time in the church calendar when we wait in hope for the God's Kingdom to be upon us?

A key theme of John's Gospel - in contrast to Mark's account of John the Baptist which we heard last Sunday - is that Jesus is not recognised or understood by those around him. 'He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him'. John's Gospel tells of how Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman understand his words but not their true meaning. Pilate gives him the right title but for the wrong reasons. The disciples constantly misunderstand him.

John's emphasis on Jesus as the one who is unknown challenges the Church - and all who seek to follow Jesus - to acknowledge the presumptuousness of taking it for granted that we know who Jesus is. The gospels recount again and again of how Jesus disrupts expectations. Then, as now, Jesus makes his appearance in ways that are surprising, unexpected -and even unwelcome. 'Baby Jesus meek and mild' of the Christmas story becomes the one who challenges the religious leaders and rages at the corruption of the Temple authorities. He offers the people teachings that make little or no sense and advocates a way of living that is utterly impractical: give to all who ask, turn the other cheek, don't be anxious about the future. He dismisses his own family, rebukes a potential follower who first wants to bury his father before joining him, and finally provokes the suspicion of the Government.

The Kingdom of God, then, interrupts our usual way of thinking; it is elusive, something to be glimpsed, not captured. It doesn't seem to deal in abstractions; with calculating the greatest benefit for the greatest numbers of people. The shepherd leaves ninety-nine sheep to search for one who is missing; the woman with ten coins is overjoyed to find the one she has lost; the father's joy is complete in that moment when he sees his wayward son far away on the horizon. Our world likes to deal in the binary and the polarised: are you in favour of lockdown or not; do we allow our NHS to be overrun; are we going to risk more lives by allowing people more freedom? Yet to Jesus, each individual is of inestimable value: each to him, is the missing sheep. All

that matters is the person in front of him at that moment; that that broken person should be made whole: the man isolated in lockdown; the woman gravely ill in hospital with Covid; the exhausted nurse; the pub landlord faced with closure; the lonely care home resident; her despairing daughter. Love is not a rationed in God's Kingdom, but abundant for all who seek.

Are we ready this Advent, to be surprised, disturbed and disrupted by the way God meets each and every one of us when his eternal love breaks through into our lives this Christmas? Amen.