

Sunday 17th December – Advent 3

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-end

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Picture the scene. Sitting on the floor in front of the dais are 60 or 70 ten year old children. Linda Pitt (it usually is her) has just welcomed them to church. She has begun to talk about the story of Jesus – building on what the children would have heard of the birth of Jesus when they had come to the Journey to the Stable some years before – and then she hands over to the drama. Everyone sits quietly and expectantly when out of nowhere there is a booming voice coming from the back of the building:

Come back to God! Come back to God!

The atmosphere changes. Suddenly the children are awake, listening and expectant. They want to know what's going on; who does the voice belong to? what message are they bringing?

It must have been a bit like that when John the Baptist actually began his ministry. For the people of Israel, God had been silent for many years. People remembered the words of the prophets because those words had been passed on by word of mouth, and then in written form. But they had never heard one of the prophets speak themselves. And here was John. A voice crying out in the wilderness. A strange figure. Disturbing people; waking them up; making them listen. Quoting from a prophet and acting like a prophet.

We read in Matthew's gospel that John's message was "Repent, for the kingdom of God is close at hand" – a message similar to the message of the Old Testament prophets who called people to turn back to their God. It was a message that shone a light on the way lives were being lived; it was a message that was best heard away from the normal routine of life; a message that John preached in the wilderness; a message aimed to stir, to agitate and to provoke a reaction. The wilderness – a place of hopelessness and drought to which John was proclaiming a message which pointed to one who would bring hope and – as he said – living water.

John's message was a simple one; turn around; leave behind your old ways; face the other way and then you will be able to see what God has in store for you. It was not for John to tell the good news, just to wake people up so they would be ready to hear the news when it came. The repentance was to disturb people into a new awareness that God was about to speak; the repentance was for people to turn round to face God – in the person of Jesus – so they could hear and hopefully respond.

And then came Jesus.

According to Luke's gospel, Jesus began his preaching and teaching ministry in the synagogue in Nazareth and the reading from Isaiah that we had this morning was the chosen text that day in Nazareth as well – Jesus took it and used it as his manifesto.

*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour,*

This then was a very different message from John's message of repentance. This was a message of God's love for all; this was a message of hope; this was a message of acceptance and new possibilities. This was a message of joy. Isaiah continues:

*to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.*

As we read through the gospel story we see how that message was delivered. Through teaching (as in the parables); through example (as in Jesus' attitudes to those who were on the margins) and through healings and wholeness as sick people and those possessed by evil spirits were brought to him for healing. We see that many responded to the message; many were filled with joy; many obtained the fullness of life he offered.

Two different messages or two very different ways of proclaiming the same message - God's message?

John focusses on the mess of both the world and of people's own lives, and calls for repentance, for a turning round and a new start. Jesus looks to the possibilities of a life in God's presence; filled with the Spirit. Life in all its fullness. Life as it was always meant to be.

This evening at our carol service (and of course next weekend as we celebrate Christmas itself) we will remind ourselves of the message that the angels proclaimed to the shepherds – to ordinary people like you and me.

Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord

Jesus. The Saviour. The bringer of salvation.

As Christians we often talk of salvation coming through Jesus' death on the cross. Salvation is the message that both John and Jesus proclaimed in their different ways. But what is salvation? How do we understand it? What can we learn about it from reflecting on our readings this morning?

John the Baptist outlines what we are saved FROM – sin, evil, hatred, mess and their consequences; saved from all the things that hold us back; saved from all the things that go against the purposes of God. In many ways saved from ourselves and our natural tendencies.

And Jesus emphasises what we are saved FOR. Lives in the presence of God through his Spirit; fulness of life; abundant life; a life full of possibilities; a life which puts others first and God at the centre; a life living in the Kingdom of God; life as God had always intended it.

And you can't have one without the other. Salvation is about a change from a position of no hope to one full of hope; from a place with no future to one with a wonderful future; from despair to joy.

So it is not enough for us to proclaim a message of repentance, focussing on our sins and our disobediences. Nor is it enough for us to concentrate entirely on the good

things that God has in store for us. The Christian gospel, the message of the Christian faith – the message of Christmas if you like – is a both ways message. It requires us to look at ourselves, to turn around and then to look to God. It's a message that involves us turning from lives centred on our own desires and hopes to ones that are centred on God and his plans for us.

Each one of us has a part to play in the proclamation of this message of salvation. Perhaps talk of proclaiming worries you. We have these pictures of John in the wilderness; of Jesus speaking to crowds on the hillside; of Paul and the other early Christian leaders standing up in synagogues and market squares.

For us it will most likely be in simple everyday conversations with friends and neighbours; with those we meet in our daily lives. And it may not even be by what we say. Sometimes actions speak louder than deeds. The way we demonstrate the power and love of God will speak volumes.

Christmas is a time when many are open to hear this message of salvation – after all the whole festival is about celebrating it! Can I encourage you, then, to be open to sharing your experience of salvation; your experience of repentance and new life; your experience of moving from despair to hope; your experience of the good news of Jesus this Christmas.