

Sermon on Sunday 6 December (at St Mary's and on Zoom) by Melanie Seward, Lay Reader

Readings: Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark 1:1-8



A Loving Welcome Awaits

A man called John who spends time withdrawing into the Wilderness, living the most basic of lives (eschewing material possessions and making his own clothes of animal skin) calls people to repentance. Imagine an individual in homemade clothing, and eating food gathered from the land, preaching in the Hertfordshire countryside (let alone the wilderness), do you think he would have much of an audience? Yet we are told that, 'The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him'. These were not all herdsman and countryfolk, the people of the city also went out into the inhospitable wilderness. Why?

The people of Palestine had a history of decline, they had often been attacked and overpowered by alien powers and they were currently enduring rule by the Romans that left most of the population with few rights and no hope that anything was about to change. Their own faith that provided the societal glue had become rule bound and benefitted an elite in cahoots with the very ruling power that dominated their lives. Each year they celebrated the Passover Festival commemorating

God's intervention in history to set them free from the bonds of Egyptian slavery, but prophecy of God's salvation for his people had become history. Then someone comes along and makes them sit up.

Knowingly, John alludes to the prophets Malachi and Isaiah. The Prophet Malachi was speaking out about the falling standards of priests and worship in the Temple, a messenger would purify this before the arrival of God's anointed one. The prophet Isaiah was bringing God's comfort to his people who felt they had lost everything – Jerusalem had fallen, the Temple was in ruins and they had been transported to another land.

Listen, said Isaiah, God has not forgotten you, he is with you here in exile - his prophecy includes a messenger who calls from the wilderness to proclaim that God is coming to right the world and reveal his Glory.... Now... John the Baptist is calling from the Wilderness announcing that it is time to prepare for the Way of the Lord. God **is** coming. But first, he says, you need to do something. You need to get ready. Confess your sins and turn back to God – be baptised as a sign of your commitment to this.

There was something about John, perhaps his directness and holiness. Certainly, his integrity and authenticity rang true for the people - here was a man of God in the mould of the prophetic tradition. The people wanted God to come into history again and save them, to send the Messiah and liberate them. Repentance was all part of **this**.

Today 'repentance' is not sexy. Try to have a discussion with someone about repentance and they are likely to find something they must do, somewhere else, very quickly. We carry some heavy-hearted images of what repentance is and these lead to misunderstanding that builds a barrier between us and God.

Repentance is seen exclusively as very serious owning up which involves some deep self-examination and being scrupulously honest before God. We call to mind the times when we have had to admit / or been caught doing something by people who have been angry or thought badly of us. Perhaps, we remember the embarrassment, the 'I told you so' or 'how could you do that?' In our society confession carries the connotation of fault, and fault is associated with failure. It is rarely voluntary or chosen; being caught out is the sin.

In traditional church teaching, 'repentance' has three stages or three parts: confession, contrition or remorse and penance. Contrition, the feeling sorry bit, often translates as dwelling on our mistakes and emotionally beating ourselves, whilst penance adds up to making up what we have done - which is not always possible or even desirable. Repentance becomes something to be discussed in vague terms and best avoided.

This year, with all that has gone on and is going on, we may not feel like making much of the season of Advent; much better to rush into the much wanted and much needed respite of a merry Christmas with the festive meals and the Vicar of Dibley or whatever tickles our sense of humour.

Our temptation might be to cut back the time for reflection on how the pattern and direction of our lives might be as (or might not be as) God would want for us. A temptation may be to think that the last thing we need is a penitential season called Advent and to think that what we really need to **do** is **stuff** to lift our spirits. I am suggesting that to slip into this way of thinking is to fall back on these old and misguided images of repentance.

The perspective of faith changes everything... including repentance. God is not an angry parent or headteacher, he transcends the specific moment of history or the immediate term, he sees beyond the mistake and looks directly at our God-given potential. Repentance, as understood from the divine perspective rather than the individual or institutional view, is more than a human desire and effort to change attitudes and behaviours, for in repentance we come to God and, in our coming to God, we find our God is coming to us.

We can keep close to our hearts the words of Jeremiah speaking to the Jew who had lost hope in exile: 'For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope' (Jeremiah 29. 11).

Think of Advent as a season of reorientation – a realigning of ourselves to turn and dwell in the hope and light of the Christ Child. As we turn from unhelpful attitudes and habits and adopt new ways of living; repentance is the place where we meet God. Like the Lost Son in Jesus' parable (Luke 15), in coming to God, we see God running towards us even when we are still far off. God is ready to welcome us.

Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort for God's People

40 Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.

² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and proclaim to her
that her hard service has been completed,
that her sin has been paid for,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.

³ A voice of one calling:
"In the wilderness prepare
the way for the Lord^[a];
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God.^[b]

⁴ Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,
the rugged places a plain.

⁵ And the glory of the Lord will be revealed,
and all people will see it together.
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

⁶ A voice says, "Cry out."
And I said, "What shall I cry?"

"All people are like grass,
and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.

⁷ The grass withers and the flowers fall,
because the breath of the Lord blows on them.
Surely the people are grass.

⁸ The grass withers and the flowers fall,
but the word of our God endures forever."

⁹ You who bring good news to Zion,
go up on a high mountain.
You who bring good news to Jerusalem,^[c]
lift up your voice with a shout,
lift it up, do not be afraid:

say to the towns of Judah,
"Here is your God!"

¹⁰ See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power,
and he rules with a mighty arm.

See, his reward is with him,
and his recompense accompanies him.

¹¹ He tends his flock like a shepherd:
He gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart;
he gently leads those that have young.

Mark 1: 1-8 John the Baptist

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

1 The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah,^[a] the Son of God,^[b] **2** as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

"I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way"^[c]—

3 "a voice of one calling in the wilderness,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.'"^[d]

4 And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. **5** The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. **6** John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. **7** And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. **8** I baptize you with^[e] water, but he will baptize you with^[f] the Holy Spirit."