

suddenly
a sermon preached on the
second Sunday of advent
6 December 2015
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
by *fr david moore*, vicar

the lections: Malachi 3:1-14, Song of Zechariah, Philippians 1:1-11, Luke 3:1-6

“The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness”¹ In the *wilderness*. The voice cries out, in the wilderness. The voice can *only be heard* in the wilderness. Among the crowds, in the frenzy of buying-and selling, awash with Christmas drinks, there is too much noise – it’s just not possible to hear the voice.

Advent is this precious gift of time and space – for preparing ourselves to hear the voice. That’s why it’s worth letting Advent be Advent.

Of course, while Advent is literally, externally, a season of four Sundays before Christmas – like everything else in Christian spirituality – the outer liturgical season is a sign of the deeper reality. The four weeks before Christmas are not the point: the point is learning to use the time to deepen in the spiritual praxis in which Advent trains us, if we will allow it.

To learn to keep Advent – in the church community, with the baptised, at work, at home, wherever – is to learn to recognise the spiritual task which we may be invited into at any time. We may at any time be called into the wilderness – in order to hear the voice.

So we look around: what do we see? As in every age, this age also is subject to despotic kingdoms and self-interested rulers and demonic economic systems: we feel the appalling chaos of our times, just as Luke the evangelist locates the appearance of the Baptist in such tumultuous times.² “People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world”, we heard Jesus say on Advent Sunday, “for the powers of the heaven will be shaken”.³ But baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ asks more of us than to merely read the newspapers and shake our heads about the state of the world.

For every external reality, there is an inner correlate. Quantum physics is demonstrating empirically in our time what the ancients intuited spiritually. All the great teachers in our tradition – and not only our tradition – have taught that nothing creative can be fully realised *exteriorly*, unless it first be accomplished *interiorly*.

Thus, whatever violence and destruction and chaos we may see ‘out there’, must first be faced up to *within*. Every good work we may do is always, to some extent, contaminated by what we ourselves want and how we feel we need to be seen by others. As any honest person can see, it is perfectly possible to ‘do good works’, to smile charmingly, to promote ourselves as welcoming, or friendly, or whatever, yet at times act aggressively, even violently, towards others. What is concealed, the hidden reality always betrays us – and pollutes and contaminates even the our best ‘works’, in pettiness, gossip, rivalry, back-stabbing, scheming, manipulating, and so many other ways. Anyone can observe this. I hasten to add that I am also speaking personally: I know this about myself.

It is for very good reason that Christian spirituality has always highlighted the importance of *motive*. “How can you say to your sister or brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye, when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye?”⁴ Motives, by definition, cannot be photographed – or posted on Facebook or websites. Motives are hidden within, in the depths of our souls.

The Lord is sending a messenger to prepare the way, who will expose our true motives, reveal what is hidden within, refine and purify by separating impurities and burning off what is dross.⁵ We may wonder, being thus exposed: “Who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?”⁶

Advent Two is an invitation to endure the day of the Lord’s coming, to listen for the voice who only be heard in the wilderness. Only by enduring wilderness will we be prepared for the coming birth. This is

¹ Luke 3:2
² Luke 3:1-2
³ Luke 21:26
⁴ Luke 6:42
⁵ Malachi 3:2-3
⁶ Malachi 3:1,2

what it means to undergo a ‘baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sins’.⁷ ‘Repentance’ means *naming the truth* about our inner rulers – and literally changing our mind.

So Advent Two poses a question to us: who are *your* inner rulers – the Emperor Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanius, Annas and Caiaphas within, who execute power within you – against which you have no conscious control? Who are the unacknowledged powers within you that rule with a tyrannical grip, and which break out in defensive, aggressive, self-interested and at times even violent forms?

And how can we come to recognise them?

Advent Two’s spiritual path is clear. By going out into the wilderness: by waiting and listening in the chaos and uncertainty of the times. Thus will every valley be filled, every mountain and hill made low, the crooked made straight, the rough made smooth.⁸ Enduring the chaos, waiting in the wilderness – neither avoiding it, nor losing hope – is Advent’s spiritual task. Indeed, it is the essential spiritual task of preparation for the birth of anything new.

But for how long must we wait?

I said to my soul, be still,
and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing;
wait without love,
For love would be love of the wrong thing;
there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought,
for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light,
and the stillness the dancing.⁹

St Paul writes a waiting church at Philippi: “My prayer is that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight”.¹⁰ Waiting in wilderness is the spiritual path to knowledge and full insight.

Finally, Advent Two makes this life-giving promise: the voice *will* be heard, by those who are willing to learn the spiritual discipline of waiting and listening in the wilderness. The Lord’s messenger *will* come. And as both poet¹¹ and prophet observe: suddenly! “The Lord who you seek will suddenly come to his temple”.¹²

Advent teaches us that the timing is not ours to control. No matter how chaotic or desperate the situation might appear to be – outer or inner – the second Advent candle reminds us that the Lord *is* preparing the way for a birth. The darkness shall be the light, the stillness will be the dancing.

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⁷ Luke 3:3

⁸ Luke 3:5

⁹ T S Eliot, ‘East Coker’, **Four Quartets**, London: Faber & Faber, 1944 p19.

¹⁰ Philippians 1:9

¹¹ R S Thomas, ‘Suddenly’, in **Collected Poems 1945-1990**, London: Phoenix, 1993, p426.

¹² Malachi 3:1