

a baptism of disruption

a sermon preached on the
second sunday of advent

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at

st john's

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the lections: Isaiah 11.1-10; Psalm 72.1-7, 18-21; Romans 15.4-13; Matthew 3.1-12

If you were looking for an antidote to the saccharin Christmas being promoted and sold around us in Melbourne at the moment, look no further than this morning's Gospel. No tinsel or cash registers or sentimental crib scenes here – just a wild man in minimal clothing out in the harsh Judean desert calling religious leaders a “brood of vipers”, and dunking people in the unappealing muddy waters of the River Jordan.

John the Baptist's appearance as we jostle school carol services and a myriad parties and end-of-year responsibilities is confronting. The scene is so foreign to us – the desert setting, the strange man in his strange clothes, and most of all, his unsettling message as he proclaims the coming Messiah: not as a baby in a manger, not as “gentle Jesus meek and mild”, but as a firebrand with a “winnowing fork in his hand”, clearing the threshing-floor, and burning the chaff with “unquenchable fire”. Goodness! What has this to do with the manger scene we are awaiting?

Advent as the time of waiting can be so easily reduced to a sort of liturgical ‘marking time’ for the big celebration, a bit like waiting in pleasurable anticipation for an important family party. John the Baptist makes it very clear today that that is not what Advent is about at all. The preparation he is demanding here is very, very different.

Let's look at John more closely. Matthew takes the trouble to describe his clothing. Unusual, isn't it? The only information the Gospel writers give us about Jesus' clothing, for instance, are the swaddling bands used at his birth, and the seamless robe stripped from him before his execution. John's clothes are by comparison quite detailed – camel hair with a belt around his waist. And we learn that he lived on insects and wild honey – the bare pickings of the desert. His clothes and food were the marks of the Old Testament prophets, so the first Jewish readers of this account would have known exactly what Matthew was driving at here. This was a man following in the footsteps of prophets like Elijah.¹ In John's Gospel, we hear that John was actually asked if he was Elijah, because it was believed that Elijah would be the forerunner of the Messiah.² Jesus himself classed John with Elijah.³ And like the Old Testament prophets, he was disruptive – disturbing and unsettling people.⁴ Sometimes he is referred to as the last of the Old Testament prophets, but rather, he represents the “between times”, a figure consciously waiting for the One who is to come and usher in the new creation.

And central to his preparation for the One who is to come was something quite radically new, a baptism of repentance. Ritual washing for religious purposes was, and still is, a common feature of Judaism. But John's ritual washing was different. His baptism of repentance symbolised a radical change of direction, a change of mind and heart, a “turning away from one way of being and doing and facing in a new and better direction”.⁵ Although

¹ 2 Kings 1:8

² John 1:21

³ Matthew 11:14

⁴ Paula Gooder, *The Meaning is in the Waiting: the Spirit of Advent*, Canterbury Press, Norwich, 2008, p. 93

⁵ Paula Gooder, p. 95

this baptism would be a one-off event, the change it symbolised was to be permanent, not transient – it was a “lifelong disruption”.

Like our baptism. Although our baptismal certificates record a single event – the day we were baptised – they represent, or are meant to represent, a lifelong change, a lifelong reorientation of our lives. So while we *were* baptised, we are to live as those who *are* baptised. As English theologian Paula Gooder puts it, “Baptism initiates us into a life of repentance, of lifelong reorientation into the things of God.”⁶ This call to a reorientation through a baptism of repentance was the preparation John the Baptist offered for fully greeting the One who was to come, the One who would baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire.

John foresaw that Jesus’ coming would bring enormous upheaval: “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”.⁷ The upheaval would also, however, promise new life in abundance, as we see in the other lections today. This is also what John the Baptist was waiting for, the new life promised from of old, as God’s kingdom – God’s rule – came near.

Look at that wonderful vision of reconciled creation, God’s rule breaking in, we have heard from Isaiah this morning:

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den.
They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;⁸

And the Gentiles – us – would be brought home to God, as the psalmist foresaw: all nations would serve God.⁹ St Paul, the missionary to the Gentiles, saw this happening before his very eyes.¹⁰

More, God’s kingdom, inaugurated by the One who is coming, would be known by its righteousness, its justice: “with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth”; “Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist”.¹¹ Note the earlier verse, that the One that is coming would “not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear”.¹² He would penetrate beneath what seemed to be the case on the surface, to discern the real truth. Truth, not superficiality, would be the hallmark of his judgement. We can hear the echo of that in John’s savaging of the Sadducees and Pharisees who, it seems, were coming for his baptism more to sticky-beak than to change their lives: “You brood of vipers!”

Where do we fit in? This strange, confronting figure heralds for us what this waiting time of Advent is about – not a passive counting down of the days until December 24, merely opening the windows on Advent calendars. Rather, Advent calls us to an active waiting on God, a waiting that paradoxically is done in quiet stillness; it reminds us that, like John, we too are “between times” – as Paula Gooder puts it, “between the beginning of the end and the end of the end”.¹³ In Christ, God’s kingdom has been inaugurated, as John saw. The kingdom is among us – but only partially. When we pray “your kingdom come”, we are acknowledging

⁶ Paula Gooder, p.96

⁷ Matthew 3:11

⁸ Isaiah 11: 6-9

⁹ Psalm 72:11

¹⁰ Romans 15:9

¹¹ Isaiah 11: 4-5

¹² Isaiah 11:3

¹³ Paula Gooder, p. 19

that we are waiting for it to come in its fullness. We have been given a vision of the world as God yearns for it to be, encouraging us to help make God's kingdom more and more present in the here and now.¹⁴ We do this by reorienting our lives towards God, as we wait for the Christ Child to be born in us once more, waiting in the sure and certain hope that the past, the present and the future is in God's hands.

Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus.

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¹⁴ Paula Gooder, p.20