

*break-through*  
a sermon preached on the  
*third Sunday of advent*  
13 December 2015  
at  
*st john's*  
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL  
by *fr david moore*, vicar

the lections: Zephaniah 3:13-20, Song of Isaiah, Philippians 4:4-7, Luke 3:7-18

I have been reflecting on Advent as a spiritual path, inviting us to consider the shape of Advent as a guide for the soul's journey.

As we heard on Advent Sunday, it begins with the experience of being plunged into chaos. Anyone can observe this – both exteriorly, out there in the world, and interiorly, within one's inner landscape. All that we had imagined to be 'permanent', 'secure', 'certain' is swept away. On Advent Sunday we heard the apocalyptic voice of Jesus speaking into our chaos.<sup>1</sup> When we are plunged into chaos there is no apparent way out, no obvious solution to all that overwhelms or threatens us – and we readily become gripped with anxiety, fear, and defensiveness.

But the Advent path shows us that this state of chaos is the very condition that takes us where we need to go: into the experience of wilderness. In the wilderness we begin to hear the Voice we're unable to hear most of the time, because of noise, distraction, clutter, hyper-activity, fixation on money, things, our reputations, or whatever it is that clutters us up. We recall from Advent Two that the Voice arrives suddenly, unexpectedly – at a time we don't control: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make the Lord's paths straight".<sup>2</sup>

In this Year of Luke, Advent Three's gospel continues on from where we left off last Sunday. All manner of people have ventured out into the wilderness to hear the Voice, to submit to John's "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins".<sup>3</sup> John would fail our standards of marketing, and 'welcoming': "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"<sup>4</sup>

I have reflected in today's *Contact* about the abrasive, even violent language of John – and indeed Jesus – as well as throughout the Scriptures. That reflection concludes with the suggestion that we are in desperate need of a recovery of the symbolic imagination. Religious literalism is killing religion – as well as killing people. The virus of literalism is without borders: no part of Christianity is untouched by literalism's aggression and violence. And we should not be fooled by Christianity's charming white-pointer shark smiles. The factors and causes of the rise of literalism within Christianity are many and varied. For those interested in pursuing this, I highly recommend Karen Armstrong's landmark year 2000 book, *The Battle for God: Fundamentalism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*.

But the focus of my reflections today is the need for recovery of the symbolic imagination that was native to the early church Fathers and Mothers. So let me illustrate how this might look as we read today's account of the Baptist.

We see that John's advice is very practical, very specific. Those who have two coats need to do something about the fact that they only need one, and that someone else doesn't have a coat at all.<sup>5</sup> Likewise regarding food. Those who collect tax are not chastised for collecting tax – but instead told to collect only what is prescribed.<sup>6</sup> Soldiers are told to not abuse their power, and instead to be satisfied with what they have.<sup>7</sup>

Now the thing is that the people who follow this kind of advice are going to pretty quickly find themselves having peer group problems. As a teacher of teenage boys, I was routinely regaled with the standard justification for action: it's what everyone else is doing. Of course, the entire economic system as we know is built on the premise that I am entitled to buy the mega flat screen TV, the latest phone and car, because everyone else has them. Fitting in with the group has always been a driver of us as persons – now so exploited by this mass-consumption culture.

So the person who follows John's counsel is soon going to find themselves out on their own, potentially ostracised by the group for daring to question the group's assumptions and demands for conformity. Most of us think we *need* the group. For the group, the collective, offers solidarity, comfort,

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1 Luke 21:20,23,25,26

2 Luke 3:4

3 Luke 3:3

4 Luke 3:7

5 Luke 3:11

6 Luke 3:13

7 Luke 3:14

protection – and the illusion of security. To be separated from the collective identity is to become acquainted with the unpleasant experience of isolation, loneliness, aloneness.

Now when we look at it this way, we may become open to the symbolic insight: ‘brood of vipers’ can be a way of speaking about what it means to be caught up in the poison of group identity. Seen in this way, what limits a person’s capacity to “see the salvation of God”<sup>8</sup> is this unreflective identification with the group. Such a person’s capacity to bear good fruit diminishes. Being ‘cut down and thrown in the fire’,<sup>9</sup> seen in this way, is an *inner* experience, not a literal one. I am speaking personally. I know this experience of so needing the affirmation and belonging of group identity that my own creativity withers: some part of me is like a branch no longer bearing good fruit, only good for burning.

You see, the symbolic imagination enables us to read sacred Scripture in such a way that it nurtures and fosters our spiritual imagination and growth – without in any way falling into the deadly trap of projecting onto others some literalistic moralising judgment or acting-out behaviour. It was this symbolic imagination that produced such an outpouring of creativity among the early church Mothers and Fathers. With such an imagination, it becomes possible to experience great hope – deep and abiding joy indeed – in the symbols of winnowing fork, the threshing floor, and the unquenchable fire of the ‘Coming One’.<sup>10</sup>

Like Advent, the symbolic imagination grows in waiting: in stillness and silence.

And here’s the mystery and the miracle. In the midst of our chaos – external or internal, or both – it is the symbol which provides the way forward, the breakthrough. Appearing suddenly, unexpectedly, as pure gift, the symbol offers the truly good news, announcing the life-giving way in the wilderness, an unanticipated break-through the chaos.

This is the root of the true joy proclaimed on Advent Three:<sup>11</sup> a joy which transcends group identity, but which, like our Lord, miraculously serves the well-being of the group, by offering the creative way through the chaos and anxiety. This is in fact the ‘birth’ we await, literally the in-carnation, in each and every human soul.

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<sup>8</sup> Luke 3:6

<sup>9</sup> Luke 3:9

<sup>10</sup> Luke 3:16-17

<sup>11</sup> Zephaniah 3:14, Philippians 4:4