

St Mary Abbots – Matins
Isaiah 35, Luke 1: 57-66
The Reverend Canon Dr Jeremy Morris

In the name...

Funny things happen when, as a newly-ordained deacon, you first put on a clerical collar and step out into the wide world. Some people, complete strangers, nod and say hello. Others look at you with that peculiarly English way of contemplating clergy which involves a mixture of pity, comedy, and sympathy or contempt. At social gatherings people who formerly laughed raucously with you clam up and say something about watching their language. Easy conversation in a party suddenly comes to an end. The worst chat-up line ever is 'I'm a priest'. Sometimes people even shout at you in the street. I remember a 'yoof' leaning out of a car accelerating past me shouting 'More tea, Vicar?' All this sort of confirms the Archbishop's recent exasperation with media caricatures of clergy. Clergy in Britain are often seen as familiar, slightly aloof or stuffy figures, a little out of touch, but generally nice and well-intentioned bumbler.

All of which makes it perhaps difficult for us to grasp just how alarming, even shocking many religious figures, and especially the prophets, were in ancient Israel. We particularly commemorate today, the third Sunday of Advent, John the Baptist, seen in the Gospels as the great messenger or forerunner of Jesus, but in his own terms surely a representative, perhaps the last, of that long line of prophets who excoriated the feckless Israelites for their lacklustre religion, their compromises and betrayals. But all the way through Advent we also quote and implicitly celebrate the prophet Isaiah in particular, supremely the prophet who preaches of a coming restoration of Israel, and of a messianic figure who could be perhaps a king or leader who will bring the people back to true worship of God and out of exile in Babylon.

John, we're told, came out of the wilderness preaching repentance and forgiveness of sins, and baptizing in the Jordan as a sign of the redemption of Israel. He was a wild-looking figure, who ate honey and locusts to survive, a Nazirite, one consecrated to the Lord by vows which included refusing wine and leaving his hair to grow long. In our day John would surely be seen as a wildman, perhaps ill or deranged even, to be tolerated but not necessarily listened to and followed. But the role of the wilderness is doubly significant, for it was not only a place barren, wild and outside settlement, where the vulnerable might be abandoned and die, but also a place of revelation. The pillar of cloud led the Israelites through the wilderness to the promised land; David sought sanctuary from Saul in the wilderness; God revealed himself to the prophet Elijah in the wilderness; and of course Jesus himself went out into the wilderness for forty days to be tempted at the beginning of his earthly mission. The wilderness is threat and also insight, risk and opportunity.

For us, living in one of the most densely populated states in western Europe, and here in Kensington in its largest city, is there any sense in which the wilderness is threat and insight? I could speak of the potential wilderness we are in the process of creating, as we lay waste our world's natural resources and desolate its great areas of natural beauty. But instead I want to focus more narrowly on the connection between the preaching of John and the preaching of Jesus. For by the time of John, clearly the target of the prophet Isaiah's criticism of Israel had to have changed. Babylon had fallen, and a remnant of the people of Israel had returned to their land in the time of Cyrus, king of Persia, hundreds of years before John. In time a new temple had been built, and the temple cult had been restored, with its rituals, rules and sacrifices. What John does in quoting Isaiah when he comes out of the wilderness, then, is to turn the very physical sense of exile into an interior sense. The people are exiled by their sins. They may worship God as the law requires, on the surface, but their hearts are bad. He recalls them to the true spirit of worship, urging them to repent of their failures and be baptized as a sign of their renewed faith. That is why, in our reading this morning, Luke says of the child John that the hand of God was on him. For his message as an adult, a religious 'wildman' is also surely the foundation of the preaching of Jesus – Jesus the Jew, that is, who did not deny the religion of Israel, but rather called for its renewal and restoration, and

in a sense its extension throughout the ancient world, so that the old Israel of Isaiah, of the old covenant, would become the new Israel, the Church of the new covenant, the new testament.

The wilderness for us in turn has become in the Gospel an interior place, a heart turned cold and against God. The exile from which we are recalled is our own constant failure to live up to the great gift of love God has laid before us in Jesus Christ. And we can, I think, get a sense of the shock of John's preaching, and in turn of Jesus's, if we consider how we are members of a long-established religious tradition, with our temples – our churches – up and down the land, many thousands of them, and a history interwoven with the history of our nation and society. In our situation, a degree of religious complacency is all too easy. Buried in all our arguments about the future of the Church of England is a whole set of presuppositions about the security, future, and thriving of the Church as we know it, and a tendency to blame the wrong missional strategy, the wrong organization, the wrong training, and so on. The truth is, that all through history established churches have frequently fallen back on taking too much for granted, and had to face challenge and renewal – such as the rise of the Franciscans, the Lollards, the Reformation itself, the Puritan movement, Methodism and the Evangelical revival, the Oxford Movement, and so on. Settled religion can become 'polite' religion. The radicalism is lost. This is really what Nietzsche meant when he said that there was only ever one Christian, and he died on the cross. It's part of the very sin in which we're caught up that we can fall back on taking too much for granted, if we're not careful.

It is all too easy to forget that the Christian Gospel is a radical, unsettling, shocking message, that ought to set us at odds with much we encounter in the world around us. Christians, following in the way of Jesus Christ, ought to be counter-cultural. Just remind yourself of those points in the Gospel when Jesus says deeply unsettling things – sell all you have and give to the poor and follow me, he has come to set son against father and daughter against mother, he has come to bring not peace but a sword, whoever does not take up his cross and follow him is not worthy of him, and so on. Yes, these things have to be understood in context, yes, often there is characteristic hyperbole in what Jesus is saying. But still, the way of Jesus is a demanding, radical way, that sets out to overturn many of the seemingly most fundamental tenets about property, loyalty and power on which historical societies have been based.

In today's text from Luke, and in the whole treatment of John the Baptist by the Gospels, we see a determined attempt by the early Christian Church to subsume the movement of religious criticism that John had started into the way of Jesus Christ. And that has two implications in particular for us. One is that this text, this narrative about John, looks back to the history of Israel, our parent religion. It reminds us of our roots in Judaism. There

is nothing here to suggest that the chosen people are outside of God's salvation history. We read Isaiah because we are in continuity with him and with his appeal to his people. We stand in his line, with John the Jew and Jesus the Jew. The shocking history of Christian anti-Semitism stands condemned in this light. We are a pilgrim people too, journeying from exile to glory.

But it also looks forward, and in Advent we celebrate that. For if there is a depressing familiarity and repetition about our inability time and again to live up to the demanding ethic of faith, so that we need redemption, we need to be called back to what God wants of us, we also know, in faith, that God has already begun the process of the great renewal and restoration of all things. We celebrate Advent and in turn Christmas every year, because through the liturgical year our lives are framed by this cycle of expectation and hope, so that our worship, our prayer, our being reminded in the life of the Church of the history of our salvation forces us again to face up to our destiny as children of God.

All this is so. But it is important to remember just what it is we celebrate. It is nothing less than God's totally overwhelming action in Christ, the sending of love into the world to redeem the world, for as Isaiah said, all flesh will see the salvation of God. God's gift is not despair, but hope, not control but freedom, not oppression but liberation, not hate but love. The demand may be radical and uncompromising, but the gift is love and joy, and in that love and joy we must, we have to, step back from all attempts to coerce and control and ban and constrain our fellow human beings. The love and joy of God come before all else.

What's true of the whole human creation is, it follows, true for each of us individually. God's love embraces us all, in Christ. Through Christ we are brought back to God. Our lives are striated by pain, difficulty, suffering, loss, just as we may also experience many good things. And we fail, almost inevitably. We need to hear John's message of repentance and forgiveness of sin. God in Christ calls us back to the best of ourselves, and – more – gives us of himself, without condition. We are accepted, loved, affirmed, in him. And he then bids us turn outwards, in hope, faith and love, to transform our world, and bring his love to others. To him, then, this Advent, be all might, majesty, dominion and power, to turn the conventions of the world upside down, and bring the radical hope of his unconditional love to all. Amen.