

Parish of Esher
Christ Church, Esher with St George's, West End

SERMON

Second Sunday of Advent, 9 December 2018
9am Sung Communion, St George's, West End
10.30am Parish Communion, Christ Church, Esher
Malachi 3.1-4; Psalm 25.1-9; Luke 3.1-6

John Sandison

Oh dear! John the Baptist, whom both readings are about and whom we remember at this season of Advent! On the face of it he preached such a dreary message, which we celebrate at a dreary time of year full of the stress of preparing for Christmas. "Repent you vipers" he is quoted as saying though it was to the scribes and Pharisees. I wonder how you as a congregation would receive him if he stood here today preaching.

Actually, you might take to him very positively. His message was that he was sent to prepare people for the Christ who was about to arrive, and that this individual would then baptise not just with water as John did but with the Holy Spirit.

Let's start with a bit of history. John was a cousin to Jesus. He lived an ascetic life similar to the Nazirites. He lived in the desert on locusts and honey, clothed in a nomad's robe of camel hair. He was born semi-miraculously to priestly parents who believed they were beyond the age of child bearing and he died after the daughter of Herod's wife, Salome who was 12 – 14 years old at the time did a probably sensual dance in front of a drunken Herod who then offered her any present she wanted. The girl prompted by her mother requested John's decapitated head be presented to Herod Antipas on a plate. Incidentally our gospel reading allows us to date the start of John the Baptist's ministry fairly accurately as being AD 29 give or take a year since Tiberius ruled as co-regent with Augustus from AD 11 or 12.

John is obviously important. He appears in all four gospels and his coming had been foretold centuries before. In our gospel reading St Luke quotes Isaiah who spoke about and foretold John some seven centuries previously.

Our first reading was from Malachi who lived about 460 B.C. and was the last of the Old Testament prophets. There was then a huge gap when no prophet spoke to the nation until John the Baptist. It was as if, in today's world, the last time that God had spoken through someone was in the reign of Henry VIII.

Malachi spoke some 140 years after the remaining two Israeli tribes had been deported to Babylon and the temple destroyed. A remnant had been allowed to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple but by the time of Malachi these were a dispirited people, whose ways had degenerated, and to whom God spoke no more. They lived in a sub – sub province of the Persian empire whose size was about 20 miles by 30 miles, containing perhaps 150,000 people with the majority in poverty.

Moreover, this remnant while outwardly keeping the religious observances are accused through Malachi of actually being lying accusers of others, oppressing the widows, the fatherless and the hired workers of adultery and of not loving the Lord. That is why the passage talks of the refiner's fire and fullers soap both of which take dross out and leave that which is pure.

His words that we heard read were both a call to repent to his generation and an oracle of the future that the Lord had planned, and in this passage, he foretells John the Baptist.

When John appears, he acts as a messenger, telling the people that the Messiah is imminent, persuading them to turn to God as a preparation for this and preaching the good news that the Messiah would baptise his followers with the Holy Spirit.

At this point Jesus appears. He was baptised by John the Baptist in the River Jordan, but unlike all the Jews who were being baptised by John, the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove and the Father spoke saying "This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased".

In the old world which stretched for roughly 2000 years from Abraham to John the Baptist, God had promised that if the Israelite nation kept his

commandments then he would bless the nation, look after it and treat them as his privileged nation. It was a time when people had little understanding of why natural events happened, and therefore very difficult for us to visualise. We understand for instance that a thunderstorm is caused by the build-up of electrical charges, but to them it was a mystery. Therefore, most natural events were thought to be caused by a God or spirit, and each nation had their own Gods. The rituals surrounding these Gods were nearly always debased – for instance the God Molech demanded that the first-born child be burnt alive as an offering. The ten commandments to the Israelites first and foremost demanded that each person followed the one true God, Yahweh as well as not indulging in certain acts for instance murder. The fortunes of the nation were based on them keeping to this, but the history of the Israelites during this period was of constantly turning to the local pagan Gods and not following Yahweh. Of course, the other nations behaved on the whole even worse.

John the Baptist's teaching reiterated this call on the Jewish nation to repent of its sins and turn back to Yahweh. He was sent it seems, both to waken the Jews to the fact that great events were imminent, that the Kingdom of God brought about by the long awaited Messiah was at hand, but also to set them in the right relationship with God by repenting of their wrongdoings and leading a life as laid out in the old testament teachings.

And many turned to be baptised by him. Unfortunately, the Jewish view of the coming of the Messiah included him being the new king who would create a world power and bring the nations back to its old glories and better.

Jesus, as we know, did not lead Israel to massive victory over its oppressors, the Romans, as the Jews expected the Messiah to do, but instead he willingly went to be crucified, murdered by these same oppressors.

This act, in a way that is not very easy to grasp changed our relationship with God the Father forever. In this new world, our relationship with God is by having faith in Him. Faith in God then leads to the Holy Spirit dwelling inside us. The Holy Spirit then changes us and gives us knowledge of Jesus and the Father. Then the Holy Spirit gradually changes us if we let Him to enable us to keep more and more of God's commandments.

Sounds simple but it is not. It starts with faith but what is faith? Jesus said "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength. This is the first and great commandment." But how do you love something that you do not know for God is unseen and invisible?

I am sure there are many routes to this. My own path I have described to some of you before, but I think it is worth repeating. I was struggling with loving God. I was probably a bit like St. Augustine "Oh Lord make me good but not just yet!" I decided that I really did not know what God was like, so I prayed "Oh God, please tell me who and what you are not what I think you are but what you really are. To my utter astonishment, I wasn't told off for all the things I do wrong, but instead love poured into my heart saying "this is what I am, love me, follow me". From that moment I began to change, not to struggle against the Lords teaching but to willingly start to follow it. In addition, the words in the Bible suddenly became real, so that instead of the reading of it being a chore, I started to love doing so.

In the sermon on the mount by Jesus, he starts with the Beatitudes, and the first one is "Blessed are the poor in Spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven" Now the poor in spirit are those who recognise they are in need of God's help, whilst the Kingdom of Heaven is God's realm. I was certainly poor in spirit when I received the Holy Spirit.

The important thing is to receive him, whether at a point of time as I did or through growth in love of and following the Christian faith. Just remember Jesus's words "Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives, and the one who seeks, finds and to the one who knocks it will be opened"

Now let's move onto Faith as we progress along the path of following Christ.

We all worry, sometimes to physical harm, over issues in our lives or events that might happen. Yet we know as we become closer to God that we should be putting our faith in him and not be worrying. Jesus said ""Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the

air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?"

Yet when it comes to it and we have an exam tomorrow, or have just been diagnosed with an illness or are about to lose one's job or a hundred and one other things often quite trivial, we find it difficult if not impossible not to worry. Unfortunately, to quote my own experience, that is probably the most difficult time to build up one's Faith, since the worry tends to override all else. And should your faith be that the event you are worrying about will not happen – that you will pass the exam, that your illness is not serious, or that the keys you have just lost will be found.

In C.S. Lewis's stories of Narnia, one of the books is called the Silver Chair in which two children are sent on a mission by Aslan, their name for God, with four signs to follow and obey. They mess up the first three, and suddenly they are confronted by the final one which if they follow it appears to be very dangerous.

"Do you mean that everything will come right if we do untie him" asks one of the children to the marsh-wiggles who is accompanying them?

"I don't know about that" said Puddleglum, "You see Aslan did not tell Pole (the girl) what would happen. He only told her what to do. That fellow will be the death of us once he's up, I shouldn't wonder. But that doesn't let us off following the sign".

And indeed, you may end up losing your job or failing the exam. So what is the Faith that we are trying to build up. It is the belief that there is a God who is Good and whom we can come to know. The next stage is to have faith that he will somehow turn all to good in the end though God's timespan is often longer than we hope for. In the case of Malachi's oracle in our first reading it took 460 years.

Nevertheless, my own experience is that the more I turn to him and have Faith, the more peace I get, the more the plans seem to work out often in the short term and the easier I find it to have faith when the next challenge arrives. Why, only a couple of days ago to take an extremely trivial example I had lost the shopping list for Sainsbury's and Liz and I had searched all over the house for it. Eventually I said a silent prayer and 10 seconds later bingo, I had been led to it.

So I do urge you in the coming week to build your knowledge and love of Him which in turn will carry over more and more into the times you start to worry. The more you do it the more peace you will find and the easier it will be to hand over to Him in times of worry.

There is a Neil Diamond song with the words:

Some worry all day 'bout who they can trust, some worry all night 'bout money and lust. Worry they do and worried they die...

Don't be like that, for we as Christians know who we can trust.